

The Shadow of Yesterday

By Clinton R. Nixon

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Credits

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Introduction

Once upon a time, there was a world named Near. It was Near, because it was all its people knew. It was composed of one Empire, taking the best of every civilization it contained and melding it into a cornucopia called Maldor. Whether jungle dweller, plains rider, grubby goblin, wolf-chaser in the snow, or wandering elf, all belonged to Maldor.

Three centuries ago, the Maldor Empire stretched from ocean to mountain, gleaming cities sprouting like flowers in its wake. Their most powerful and successful emperor-general, Absolon, called all of his advisors and most powerful of magicians to him for one singular task to cement the Empire as the greatest the world had ever known: the construction of a language for his varied subjects. He wanted a language to be crafted that was easy for anyone to learn that incorporated all the concepts of every cultural influence under his rule.

The advisors and magicians spent months using their arcane crafts to map the mind of man and examining the nuances of every language spoke within the Empire. They finally discovered their key in the language of the Zaru, the native people of a once tiny-but-prosperous delta kingdom. Their native tongue, which they kept highly secretive, was different than any other known language. It was built not of words, but of things called zu, tiny discrete bits of ideas, each pronounced as one syllable, which were combined in a complex method that could convey any idea depending on the zu used and in what order. Best of all, this language had a unique power: anyone who heard it understood the zu and in prolonged exposure gained knowledge of how to speak the language.

Emperor Absolon commanded his advisors to spread the language of zu throughout his Empire. As soon as the breath that made this command left his mouth, one of the Zaru, a rice-farmer and philosopher named Hanish, burst into Absolon's throne room, the dirt of hundreds of miles of running covering his body. He fell to his knees and begged the Emperor to not unleash zu on the world. He had seen a fiery dot in the sky, bright enough to be seen in mid-day, and swore it was an omen that the language of zu would bring destruction to the world. Absolon, hungry for unification, ignored Hanish and the omen, and the advisors left with the cryptic syllables on their tongues and Hanish left in chains, thrown into Absolon's dungeons.

The language of zu spread like wildfire throughout the Empire. With it, the Empire blossomed even more with new art blending the ideas of all of man shared among all peoples. The Empire's magicians grew in power, the magical language being an optimal way to call on the primal forces they commanded.

In his private quarters, though, Absolon worried. He had his astronomers scan the sky and they too saw the fiery dot on the edge of existence. Even worse, this dot seemed to grow larger by day, as if the sky itself was beginning to burn away. Within six months, this dot grew as large as the sun itself, and burned bright by night, causing fear and unrest in Absolon's newly-solidified kingdom. Mothers held their crying children to their breast, trying to block the fell rays of this celestial fire from their babies' eyes; peasants grew fearful as their beasts moaned in confusion at night; priests proclaimed the end of the world was coming.

And all looked to their Emperor, Absolon, for guidance, but Absolon had none. Zu could not be revoked.

Absolon called on Hanish, threatening him with death if this curse was not removed from the world. Hanish lay himself before Absolon's executioners, proclaiming, "Kill me now, or I die in six months' time. The sky's fire cannot be stopped, and my death comes now or then." Moved by Hanish's bravery and defiance, Absolon took him to his side as his highest advisor and they spent many hours talking alone. The people of the Empire grew more and more worried: their Emperor spent all his days privately conversing with the man who would destroy the world while the fire in the sky grew bigger. Within an-

other three months, this burning orb illuminated everything in the burnt red of flame both day and night. The sun could not even be seen.

And three months later, in the midst of open revolt, chaos, madness, prophets proclaiming the death of all life, assassinations, and depravity, Absolon and Hanish emerged from the Emperor's quarters. The Sky Fire had grown no bigger than half the sky, but its heat was now palpable as temperatures soared to intolerable levels, and the entire sky was painted red and purple in eternal sunset as the globe burned away the air.

Absolon and Hanish stood on the steps of the Emperor's Palace, hand in hand, and began a chant in zu to the sky, intoning ancient syllables which spread throughout the angry crowds outside, calming them as they joined the chant. This chant lasted for three days, and it is said that by the end of those three days, the entire Empire had taken up the chant. The Fire moved slowly across the sky, though, and at the end of the three days, crossed the western horizon and night fell again. Absolon and Hanish collapsed on the stairs where they chanted, their spirits gone and bodies broken.

Then, the world halted.

In the midst of night, the world shook with such a rumble that buildings fell, cracks opened spewing lava, and mountains formed out of plains-land. Men wept and tore their clothes, animals stampeded, and the elderly died of shock. A red glow came from every horizon, with black smoky clouds billowing. The clouds grew and grew as the earth continued to shake for days on end, the sun barely visible, and finally even blotted out that orb of life-giving light.

For a year, the earth quivered and the sun rose no more, with only black clouds looking down on humanity. The earth froze. For one year, through the harshest of winters, people died of plague, starvation, and madness. By the end of that year, the population of the known world was a tenth of what it had been, and the ones that were left found they no longer spoke the language of zu, but instead spoke in tongues that had been forgotten to them, eradicated by the brain-shaping power of zu. Their knowledge, craft, and art were lost to them, destroyed as surely as the sun.

One year after its disappearance, the sun rose weakly in the sky, barely shining through the breaking clouds. People driven to primitivism stuck their heads out of their caves, hovels, and homes to see the beloved sun as it rose to the middle of the sky and the foul darkness broke around it. When it set, though, living persons everywhere shook with horror.

A moon rose in the sky. Never had a moon been seen in the world. The only object ever seen in the night sky was the dread Sky Fire, which this bore too much a resemblance to. Its pale light threw dark shadows onto the land. Worse, when the sun rose the next day, this moon - three times as large as the sun - eclipsed the sun, a black Shadow Moon rimmed in fire.

Three hundred years have passed. The old civilizations have begun to grow again. Even in the shattered realm of Maldor, people inhabit some of the old cities. Elves and goblins wander the world again, and new strange species have developed. Magicians have regained some of their power, as their ancient tongues are recalled, and priests comfort the survivors of an apocalypse.

And once a month, the sun is eclipsed for one entire week by the Shadow Moon.

Some people quiver in abject fear.

And some heroes fight the Shadow, in the darkest caves, the most decayed of civilizations, and the blackest hearts.

What this is

This is a role-playing game (or RPG), which you probably already know if you're reading it. If you don't already know what a role-playing game is, it's a type of entertainment where each player takes on the role of a character they have created using a system that represents the boons and flaws of a fictional protagonist. These players describe what their characters do while one particular player, known in this text as the Story Guide, describes their surroundings and the other characters (often known as non-player characters or NPCs) that they meet. And that's about it. If you like stories, or acting, or spending time making up fantasies with others, then you'll like it.

A little bit about the phrase “role-playing game”

The phrase “role-playing game” is totally misleading. The types of games lumped into this phrase differ from each other as much as playing a first-person shooter computer game differs from acting in a play or recreating a historical battle. “Role-playing game” was the phrase coined for Dungeons and Dragons when it was apparent it didn't fit into other known categories, and it's stuck for a whole class of games, although attempts at using “story-telling game” or “adventure game” have happened and failed.

Why is it a misnomer? Here's why: some RPGs provide a framework for telling a story with your friends, others provide a structured system for representing day-to-day occurrences in a real or fictional world, and others provide a play environment for competition among the participants. Only one of the above - the last - is what would traditionally be called a game, and none of the above, with the possible exception of the second, fit the definition of role-playing as it's used in psychiatrists' offices or corporate team-building exercises. In those, the point is to gain a closer understanding of others - or yourself - by pretending to be in a different situation.

The Shadow of Yesterday, and many other games besides, do none of that. Sure, you can empathize with characters and their struggles, and you can enjoy crushing the minions of some ruthless tyrant in the game, but it's first and foremost about creating a fictional fantasy with your friends. I've tried to think up new names myself, and came up with “story-creation system,” “fantastic framework,” and other such unwieldy names.

So, “role-playing game” it is. I just thought you should know it's a misnomer.

What this RPG is about

The Shadow of Yesterday is set in a near-destroyed world, the victim of a huge celestial body striking it and causing a moon to shatter away from the world, fragmenting civilization and providing lots of room for characters to run around and re-create civilization as they might want it.

It's built on a great deal of optimism and hope, with a sharp streak of sadness at the state of the world injected. “The Shadow of Yesterday” refers to a world gone and destroyed, with only a terrible Shadow Moon to remind people of it. “The Shadow of Yesterday” refers to characters who desperately seek to save their homes as they are taken away. “The Shadow of Yesterday” refers to my own first discovery of RPGs and the idea of the game I wanted to play then.

Designer's notes

This game is designed with very specific purposes in mind. It's meant to let you make interesting characters with clear purposes in their existence. It's designed to allow for dramatic reversals in those purposes as well, creating thematically-packed instances in play. It's designed to represent a fusion of fantasy-fiction elements I call "pumpkin fiction." This term comes from the person who introduced me to this type of fantasy, and means a type of fantasy where things don't necessarily make common sense, but are always full of style, a bit creepy, a bit comedic, a bit dark and violent, and definitely romantic. You'll notice there's quite a few rules in here that have to do with love and sex, more than in the average role-playing game. I mentioned earlier that this is the game I would have wanted as a teenager: as one, and even now, I love love and sex. I'm a romantic, and think good stories revolve around a few things:

- Love and sex, as mentioned
- The propensity for violence and death
- Wonder and magic, especially in everyday life
- The chance for hope, even in the bleakest situations

Those four things are what *The Shadow of Yesterday* is about. If you like those things, too, then you'll like this game.

Now, I've sacrificed some of what you'll see in other RPG systems to make this game. You won't see, for example, any sort of character balance. (This refers to a system that tries to make certain no player's character is more "powerful," or able to affect non-player characters, than anyone else's.) I tried it, and realized it wasn't important, and that's that. You won't see a system for improving players' characters that's based off any sort of in-game causality. Instead, you'll see a system that improves characters for their players hitting the four basic important story elements I mentioned above. You also won't see any "realism," whatever that might mean to you, here. Your character will be able to do some amazing feats because he or she's a hero, and your character won't be able to do other things because they're defined, as a story element, as not being able to.

Other bits of designer's notes will be scattered throughout this text, all prefixed with "Designer's Notes." Don't worry, you'll see 'em.

Oh, one last wiggly bit. Lots of role-playing games these days worry about how to use gender-specific and gender-non-specific pronouns. For the rest of this text, I'm just going to try to avoid any situation where I have to worry about this. I'll use lots of examples where you see that Billy's a player, and Ellie is his character, and he's a boy and she's a girl. When I can't avoid it, though, the generic player, and his character, will be male, and the Story Guide will be female.

Influences

This game came about for one reason, and it wasn't my idea. Ron Edwards wrote an essay called "More Fantasy Heartbreakers" (a sequel to an earlier essay, and easily found at <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/>) in which he suggested (crediting Mike Holmes for the idea) that everyone should write their own "heart-breaker," or game based off of experiences and problems playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. I planned for this to be a fun little exercise, and it took hold of my imagination and absolutely refused to let go. It's moved a lot from its original focus - I dropped the D&D influence and started using every influence I could - but it's got some ineffable magic that I can't resist.

This is definitely the game with the most blatant theft I've written. A huge portion of the rules and ideas are cobbled straight from other game texts. While this is the case with most games, I've tried to be rather explicit about it. As far as my influences go, here's a short list, all of which are good games in their own right.

Role-Playing Games

The Riddle of Steel by Jake Norwood (Driftwood Publishing) and Sorcerer by Ron Edwards (Adept Press): These games gave me the idea of advancement based off player-set character wants and desires (Keys). Seeing as these are the big two games I play, they've probably crept elsewhere into the game.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer by C. J. Carella (Eden Studios): The basic dice mechanic, including a variation on Success Levels.

Over the Edge by Jonathan Tweet with Robin Laws (Atlas Games): The bonus and penalty dice mechanic.

Fudge by Steffan O'Sullivan (Grey Ghost): Naming the level of success with descriptive terms.

HeroQuest by Greg Stafford and Robin Laws (Issaries): The idea of characters defined by culture, and the "Bringing Down the Pain" system.

Rolemaster by Iron Crown Enterprises: Again, too damn much, but mainly the way characters develop abilities. I played the bejeezus out of this game as a kid.

D&D (3rd edition) by Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams (WoTC): Secrets are directly influenced by the Feat system of this game.

Dying Earth by Robin Laws (Pelgrane Press) and Shadowrun by FanPro: Attributes as resource pools (from both) and refreshment of these pools (Dying Earth).

Schism by Jared Sorensen (Memento-Mori Theatricks): The idea of character "transcendence."

Books and authors

This game is obviously influenced by Tolkien, and even more so, all those cheap-ass Tolkien copiers that most of us read in our youth. Their Dark Lords and magical elves and such permeated and ruined modern fantasy. I'm thoroughly ashamed for the books I read from about 17-20, and especially for the fact that they've influenced much of my writing since then.

In order to rectify myself, I've tried to be equally influenced by Robert E. Howard and his fabulous stories about the Hyborian Age. The different species and brooding darkness are a bit of a slap in his face, owing as much to that fucking hack Robert Jordan than anything else, but the decline of civilizations, great empty walled cities, and black forests are all Howard. ("Red Nails" and "Beyond the Black River" were the two stories that shoved their way into this game in major ways.) An article in the February 2003 Discover magazine, "How Was the Moon Formed?" was also a huge inspiration.

To see photographs of the World of Near, I recommend a book called Secret Corners of the World, produced by the National Geographic Society. The images of places and people in this book were instrumental in painting a picture of Near. I also read Desperate Journeys, Abandoned Souls: Stories of Castaways and Other Survivors while writing this game, which brought a certain focus on sea life.

Thanks and credits

Much thanks to everyone who play-tested or gave comments on this game that took too damn long to birth. Specifically:

John Harper and Dan Root: Thanks from stopping me from making a pretty awful game and making the first playtest of this truly fun, even with the world's longest combat.

Alan Barclay, James Cunningham, Wilhelm Fitzpatrick, Laura Mortensen, Matt Wilson, and all the Seattle Monday night gang: You guys keep it rocking and thanks for inspiration and comments.

The Shadow Australia playtest group (Mike Hill, Sarah Horton, Emma Lee Horton, Andrew Main and Debra Hill): I appreciate knowing these rules still work even when the toilet flushes backwards.

The attendees of ClintonCon 2, most of which are named above, except Jared Sorensen, who managed to goblin it up in a major way.

Ron Edwards and Keith Senkowski, who found themselves in a snarling ball of fur.

Game Concepts

About the rules

In order to create a narrative framework, The Shadow of Yesterday needs rules that help the players create a story, know what characters can do, and adjudicate situations where the outcome is not certain. As a designer, I've tried to make these rules simple and easy to use.

Just to let you know upfront, this game does use dice of the six-sided variety, the kind found in just about any store on the planet, including convenience stores, grocery stores, and hobby shops.

Characters

Characters represent all sentient beings in the game. While not every stranger met by the players' characters may be fully fleshed out in terms of mechanics, all characters that could be created in the game should be able to be created with these rules. In order to define who a character is and what that character can do, there are four mechanical pieces: pools, abilities, Secrets, and Keys.

Pools

Pools are resources the player can spend during the game in order for their character to push harder, do more, and perform amazing feats. There are three pools: Vigor, Instinct, and Reason.

Vigor represents the character's reserves of physical power, wherewithal, and mental toughness. Characters with high Vigor are often known for bulging muscles, scarred faces, calloused hands, the "thousand-yard stare," and crushing strength.

Instinct represents the character's reserves of animal-like reactions, both physical and social. This ranges from cat-like reflexes in combat to pheromone-like sexual attraction. Characters with high Instinct are often known for their graceful motion, penetrating eyes, amazing hearing, stunning appearance, or sexual prowess.

Reason represents the character's intelligence and mental power. This could range from book knowledge to an uneducated, but highly practical mind. Characters with high Reason are often known for their vocabulary, ability to identify plants and animals, skill at games of chance, or power over others.

Pools are measured in points, and each pool ranges from one to infinite points, although a pool of more than 10 points is highly unusual. During the game, these points are spent to get bonus dice or activate Secrets (more on all of this below), but are not permanently gone. The scores on each player's character sheet represents the maximum points in each pool, and players will get a chance to restore their characters' pools to their maximum.

Abilities

Abilities are representations of a character's skill with tasks both learned and innate. Some examples of abilities are Sailing, Tracking, Sword-fighting, and Oratory.

Abilities fall into several categories, listed below.

Innate Abilities: These are actually more reactions and innate qualities than abilities, representing unlearned abilities a character has.

Artistic Abilities: These are the abilities that allow you to create works of art, as well as manage to live as an artist, from hand to mouth.

Craft Abilities: These abilities are used to create works of utility, from swords to carts to dinner, or perform in a useful profession, as well as trade well for your labor.

Fighting Abilities: These are the abilities a warrior would learn in battle, consisting of not only martial abilities, but combat medicine and command.

Illicit Abilities: These are the abilities any criminal, or even slightly shady person, would put to good use, including the ability to sneak well, steal, and find others that would aid and abet your activities.

Outdoor Abilities: These are the abilities any outdoorsman would know, consisting of empathy with animals, knowledge of plants, and the ability to hunt with a bow.

Social Abilities: These are the abilities any person who operates in society would know, including bringing others to your opinion, reading the faces of men, getting others into your bed, and speaking foreign languages.

Priestly Abilities: These are the abilities a priest or leader of men would use in his daily life. Priests aren't necessarily organized, or even religious: they are merely counselors, and have the ability to inspire others, sway crowds, read the faces of people, and comfort the troubled.

Each category of abilities is ranked from A to C, representing how easy it is for a character to improve those abilities.

Abilities are ranked from zero to 10, with 10's being the absolute pinnacle of ability. In addition, each ability has an associated pool. Points from this pool can be spent during the game to get bonus dice or remove penalty dice when using the ability.

When characters are created, most abilities they get to pick from are determined by their species and home culture, while a few are open, which means any character can have these abilities.

Secrets

Secrets are special abilities a character can learn that augment abilities. These are often preternatural, sometimes magical, and always better than normal. In order to use Secrets, points from a pool are normally spent, meaning that Secrets can be used a limited number of times per game.

Secrets can be better explained with an example:

Secret of the Hidden Pocket: This character is adept at hiding objects on his person. No matter how carefully searched the character has been, he may pull an inexpensive, small (hand-sized) item off his person with a successful Stealth Ability Check. There is no need for the player to have written this item on the character sheet previously.
Cost: 1 Instinct.

Like abilities, most Secrets are classified by species and culture, with a few open Secrets.

Keys

Keys are the primary method of increasing a character's abilities in The Shadow of Yesterday. These are goals, emotional ties, or vows a character has. By bringing these into the story, the player gains experience points (XP) he can use to advance the character, increasing pools and abilities, or learning new Secrets and Keys.

Again, an example will illustrate this better:

Key of Conscience: Your character has a soft spot for those weaker than their opponents. Gain 1 XP every time your character helps someone who cannot help themselves. Gain 2 XP every time your character defends someone with might who is in danger and cannot save themselves. Gain 5 XP every time your character takes someone in an unfortunate situation and changes their life to where they can help themselves.

Buyoff: Ignore a request for help.

The Buyoff shown above is a special bit about Keys. Whenever a player has a character perform the action shown in one of the Buyoffs, the player can (this is not mandatory) erase the Key and gain 10 XP.

Unlike abilities and Secrets, the number of Keys a character can have is limited. A character can have no more than five Keys at one time.

The Ability Check

In order to perform any action that has a variable outcome in The Shadow of Yesterday, the player needs to state his basic intention for the character. This is not a full description of the action, as the dice provide a randomizer that let the player know how well this action happened. After stating the character's intention and deciding on the relevant ability, a Ability Check is made.

The process is pretty simple: roll two six-sided dice and add your character's score in the relevant ability to the total. Taking this total, compare your result to the Success Level Chart.

The Success Level Chart	
Roll + ability	Success Level (SL)
8 or below	Failure
9-10	SL 1 (Mediocre)
11-13	SL 2 (Good)
14-15	SL 3 (Great)
16-17	SL 4 (Amazing)
18-19	SL 5 (Legendary)
20-21	SL 6 (Ultimate)
22	Transcendent

To use the Success Level Chart, take the total of your character's ability and the dice rolled and find the total on the chart. As you can see, you will find whether the character succeeded or failed, a description of that success if applicable, and a numerical Success Level, which is used to compute mechanical effects of that success.

A Mediocre success is all that is needed to succeed at most tasks in the game. Especially hard tasks may require a Good success.

Bonus and penalty dice

While a ability score determines the range of your character's ability, bonus and penalty dice are a mechanic to determine the consistency of your character's ability. When making a Ability Check, bonus dice add to the number of dice rolled, as do penalty dice. However, a player cannot have both bonus and penalty dice: they cancel each other out on a one-for-one basis.

If a player has bonus dice when making a Ability Check, roll two six-sided dice, plus the number of bonus dice. The two highest dice are used to calculate the player's total on the Ability Check.

If a player has penalty dice when making a Ability Check, roll two six-sided dice, plus the number of penalty dice. The two lowest dice are used to calculate the player's total on the Ability Check.

Players can always spend one point from the associated pool to get one bonus die on a Ability Check. If a Ability Check has penalty dice, this must be done before the roll in order to cancel out penalty dice. If a Ability Check has no penalty dice when it is rolled, this can be done after the roll. This is an important distinction: when your character is fully ready and prepared for a task, he may push harder in the middle of it to pull out a greater success. When ill-prepared, he must take what hand fate deals.

Experience and Advancement

A major part of play in *The Shadow of Yesterday* is character advancement. As mentioned in the introduction, it asks the question, "If you could change the world, what would it be like?" In order to both see the world from an everyman's perspective and grow to influence it, characters are meant to move from being relatively normal people to powerful champions of whatever they might stand for.

One important note that is a bit different from some other fantasy role-playing games is that within a story, characters are meant to go from the lowest levels of power to the highest. The end of a story occurs when at least one character has achieved the pinnacle of expertise in a subject. In order to do this, *The Shadow of Yesterday* uses a sliding scale to determine how long it takes a character to advance, providing for both short and long campaigns.

The two units of advancement currency are experience points and advances. Experience points are a "hard" unit of currency: that is, there are set amounts of them that the player receives for certain actions in play. Experience points convert to advances on the sliding scale mentioned above. In the average game, it takes 10 experience points to achieve one advance. With an advance, a player can do one of six things:

- Increase by one the maximum size of one of the character's pools.
- Increase three of the character's abilities rated at A. (The ability rating system is explained further in Chapter 3: Character Creation.)
- Increase two of the character's abilities rated at B.
- Increase one of the character's abilities rated at C.
- Add one Secret to the character.
- Add one Key to the character.

When taking advances, none of the above options can be repeated. If you've increased three of your character's abilities rated at A, for example, you can then do anything but increase three more abilities rated at A. After you've taken another advance, you may then go back and increase three more A-rated abilities. Advances can be spent at any time during the game.

Character Creation

Making your character is the most important part of The Shadow of Yesterday. In doing so, you not only define the person you want to play within the world of Near, but you determine exactly what that play will be about. Through a combination of character concepts, species, cultures, and Keys, every player gets to contribute to the content of the story.

Concept

In order to start creating a character, a concept needs to be built. The character concept cannot be generated in a vacuum, however; characters must fit together with a certain zest that makes them click, little motors ready to feed off each other. This isn't to say that all characters need to be alike, of the same species and culture, or even from the same place. (The Shadow of Yesterday is easily usable for a game where all characters stick together, or wander about on separate adventures.)

There's not a set process for how concept generation works, but it should be done as a group, in a relaxed atmosphere, preferably with whatever gets your imagination flowing, whether that be coffee, beer, music, or whatever else. Talk amongst each other, and don't think of your idea as sacrosanct: take suggestions from other players and give them back. Remember that in creating these characters, you create the landscape in which you will play.

- At the end of generating character concepts, you should have a few things:
- An idea of where your character is from.
- A few - and I mean a few - sentences about who your character is and what he cares about.
- A description of your character's appearance, also short.
- A name. This is totally not optional. Pick a name before you write a number.

Many role-playing game texts will tell you to have a good idea of who your character is before play. I totally disavow this. You and your friends will get to know your character during play. What that character did before-hand is of some interest, but even those details will emerge during play easier than before play. If you were reading a book, would the author expect you to know the main character before-hand? Of course not.

What you do need to know is this: what species this character is, where he's from, what he's good at, and what might be important to him.

Species

There are five major sentient species in the world of Near. In choosing which species your character is part of, you have to think about the following:

- What nifty abilities and Secrets can I get because of this species?
- How does this species fit into the culture we're playing in?
- How does this species interact with the other characters' species?
- What does this species represent to me? Why would I want to play this sort of character?

Species are split into two groups: the Old Species, which existed before the coming of the Shadow, and the New Species, which came after the Shadow Moon. Humans, goblins, and elves are in the former group, and ratkin are in the latter.

You will have to decide on what species your character is. If torn, remember that humans are the most popu-

lous, and the other species exist in order to put humans' strengths and weaknesses into contrast.

Humans are the most populous species of sentient people on Near, and are found anywhere in the world one might look. Their power has waned significantly, though, since the time of Shadow. They are infinitely adaptable, and pick up new things easier than any other species.

Goblins live wherever others have deemed too hot, too cold, or too foul. Infinitely adaptable beings, the small wiry things manage to resemble demons, dogs, and men at the same time. Their curiosity drives them into all the forgotten places of the earth, and makes them decent apprentices for just about any job: they catch on quickly, but tend to cause as many accidents as they do help. Their bodies have an ability to evolve to match their environment, and their offspring carry these same characteristics. Left alone, their societies are incomprehensible to any outsider.

Most of them do not understand the human concept of love: they have a monomaniacal mind, and live to fulfill whatever craving they are currently fixated on. A few have been observed in a bizarre state that resembles human love, known only as "the Affliction" in their rough language. These goblins leave their tribe and travel, their only goals to prove their love or die.

No one except elves really understand what they are, or where they're from. To hear them explain it, they are native to another world spiritually above Near but travel from world to world. They exist solely as magical beings that create their own bodies, with an immortal spirit that returns to their home upon their death. Like goblins, they do not generally love in a human sense: they view love as a want that debases their personality, as they view all wants.

Elves spend most of their time wandering from place to place, rarely settling down for more than a few months. They form few attachments, and may find themselves in a position of leadership, as a lover, or as a helper, but view all of these positions as only good deeds done towards others, and with complete disinterest. Elves usually take on the appearance of perfect human specimens, but cannot avoid the residual glow that always comes off of their skin from their inherent magic. They can be found nearly anywhere on Near, but are most common in places where humans are concentrated.

Playing Ratkin

Note: Ratkin are not to be played as annoying creatures who steal everything from everyone, especially other player characters. This will result in other players beating you soundly. Ratkin will respect other people's property, if they are not ratkin and they respect their own property. Of course, the moment a character doesn't really respect his own property, ratkin'll take it in a second.

Ratkin resemble nutria, enormous rodents, standing on their hind legs with opposable thumbs. About three to four feet tall, they have pointed button noses, whiskers, and are covered in either grey, brown, or black fur, with the occasional albino all-white ratkin. They are generally not trusted by all other species except goblins, and known as dirty thieves. They live primarily in cities.

When among their own kind, ratkin live in a communal situation, with no discernible leader or structure. Property owned by a ratkin, including a mate, is considered free game for other ratkin. While the huge vermin are quick to come to each others' aid against a common enemy, they are vicious competitors within their own society.

It is rumored that among a litter of ratkin, only two or three of the often fifteen to twenty children both actually become ratkin, with the rest becoming larger than normal rats.

Culture

You will have to decide on a culture that your character is from. You and your friends have probably decided on an area in which the game will start before play, and your characters will likely come from that area and its surrounding cultures. More on each culture is found in Chapter 5: The World of Near, but a quick run-down of each culture follows.

The northern-most culture in Near, Qek is full of steaming jungles and active volcanoes. Its members are primitive and form close-knit family units. Qek is rich in spices and jewels, but is full of danger. Humans, goblins, and elves come from Qek.

Khale is a land of wild forests, tall tales, magic, and song. It has a tribal culture and values myth and art, and has a definite Celtic influence. It is currently at war with Ammeni, and grows smaller each year as the ruthless invaders attack. Humans, goblins, elves, and the occasional ratkin come from Khale.

The large country of Ammeni consists mainly of delta, swamp, and wet lowlands, and their largest exports are rice and opium. Caste is very important in Ammeni, and those of the upper caste are cruel and dominate those below them. The food is wonderful, though, as would be expected in this French-Vietnam influenced land. Almost all people in Ammeni are humans, although the rare goblin is found as a lackey, and ratkin hide away in the nooks and crannies.

Maldor is the ruins of what once was the Empire. Wrecked by the coming of the Shadow, it struggles to survive, unaided by the feudal system that still controls it. It is full of great castles and cities abandoned and full of secrets to discover. Humans and ratkin are very common in Maldor and elves and goblins are also found there.

Pools

Once past the heavy-thought areas of concept, species, and culture, the fun number action begins. First up is your character's pools.

Divide 12 points among your character's pools, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 6 in each. (Note: this maximum is just for character creation; your character may end up with a pool later much higher than 6.) Characters of species other than humans have special notes about their pools.

Goblins generally have a high Vigor pool, and low Reason. Vigor may start as high as 7, while Reason can never start higher than 3.

Elves' Vigor and Instinct scores must always add up to twice their Reason score or less, as their bodies are created solely through the application of their Reason to influence the world. This does mean Reason will start at 4 or more, with the other points split between Vigor and Instinct.

Ratkin generally have a high Instinct pool, but weakened Reason. Instinct may start as high as 8, but Reason may not start higher than 4.

Abilities

Ability categories are rated by how easy it is for the character to learn them. When creating a character, you must set these ratings. Innate Abilities are always rated at A (the easiest to learn.) Choose one other ability category to be rated at A, three to be rated at B, and the rest rated at C.

Classes

The Shadow of Yesterday does not have “classes,” a feature found in some other fantasy role-playing games. However, we do provide templates for common types of characters, determined by their skill set priorities.

- Warrior. A: Fighting; B: Outdoor, Illicit, Craft; C: Social, Artistic, Priestly
- Outlaw. A: Illicit; B: Social, Fighting, Outdoor; C: Artistic, Craft, Priestly
- Woodsman. A: Outdoor; B: Fighting, Craft, Illicit; C: Artistic, Social, Priestly
- Priest. A: Priestly; B: Artistic, Social, Illicit; C: Craft, Fighting, Outdoor
- Socialite. A: Social; B: Artistic, Priestly, Illicit; C: Outdoor, Craft, Fighting
- Craftsman. A: Craft; B: Artistic, Outdoor, Social; C: Illicit, Fighting, Priestly
- Artist. A: Artistic; B: Social, Priestly, Illicit; C: Craft, Fighting, Outdoor

As with pools, species other than humans have some special rules:

- If playing an elf, Artistic Abilities must be rated at A or B.
- If playing a goblin, Illicit Abilities must be rated at A or B. Social Abilities must be rated at B or C.
- If playing a ratkin, Illicit Abilities must be rated at A or B. If playing an albino ratkin, Artistic Abilities also must be rated at A or B.

At this point, individual abilities must be chosen. These are picked from open abilities, abilities everyone can learn; species abilities, abilities that can be picked by members of the relevant species; and cultural abilities, abilities that can be picked by members of the relevant culture. (Cultural abilities can be learned by members of other cultures later in the game.)

All characters start with all open innate abilities, which are all rated at one initially.

Players can then choose all abilities that fall into A-rated categories, 5 abilities that fall into B-rated categories, and 3 abilities that fall into C-rated categories. Some species and cultures may have mandatory abilities, which are marked. These must be taken, and count against the character's beginning ability slots. These abilities chosen are only for initial ability point distribution: past this stage, you can increase any ability that your character has access to.

Players have ten points to split among abilities rated at A, with no ability ranking higher than 3. They have six points to split among abilities rated at B, with no ability ranking higher than 2. Three points can be split among abilities rated at C, with no ability higher than 2.

Secrets and Keys

Before play, players can choose one Secret and one Key for their characters. These can be taken, like abilities, from the relevant Open, Species, and Cultural Secret and Key lists.

Further Advances

Lastly, players start with a number of advances for their characters. This is determined by the group before play, depending on how powerful characters are to be at the beginning of the game. The standard number is five, with normal rules as to how they can be spent applying.

Playing the Game

More about the Ability Check

The Ability Check is the core of The Shadow of Yesterday's system. All other mechanics are meant to revolve around this roll of the dice, this injection of fortune, that serves as resolution for both instant actions and entire scenes.

Range and accuracy

As a designer, I firmly believe that randomness is the core of a good RPG system. Bad applications of it, though, are the downfall of many ill-conceived systems. So, if I'm going to screw around with probability, I owe the reader an explanation of how it works in this game.

Every Ability Check in this game can be described in terms of range and accuracy. The term range refers to the possible outcomes of an Ability Check. As the player rolls two six-sided dice, results from two to twelve plus a character's pertinent ability is always the range of a check. Note that a character with zero ability has a range with no result better than Good on the Success Level Chart, and a character with an ability of 7 cannot fail. Related to this is the idea of an average outcome, the outcome most expected with any level of ability. Since seven is the most likely outcome on any roll of two six-sided dice, characters with no ability can be expected to fail most of the time. Characters do not succeed on average until their ability reaches 2.

Range seems like a simple concept, and it is. It's also very important, though: notice that a character with even one point of ability always has a chance of beating a character with an ability of 10, albeit small. This is entirely on purpose: in The Shadow of Yesterday, your character has a limit to how good he might do at a task, but it always might be good enough to beat the other guy.

Accuracy is the other parent of an average outcome. Ability Checks can have bonus and penalty dice, as explained in Chapter 2. Each bonus die raises the chance of having a higher result significantly, increasing accuracy. Penalty dice do the opposite, lowering the average outcome, thereby lowering accuracy. The following chart shows the average outcome with various amounts of bonus and penalty dice. The appendix to this book details the statistics involved with bonus and penalty dice further. Knowledge of these is not necessary to play the game, but it's sometimes nice to know that you have a decent chance of beating a character with an ability two higher than your character if you have a bonus die.

Intention, Initiation, Execution, and Effect

Although the Ability Check seems very simple, there's more involved than it seems at first glance. Every time your character takes an action, there are four steps involved: Intention, Initiation, Execution, and Effect. Here's how these break down:

- **Intention:** The player announces the intended action for the character. No movement or action has happened yet, though. The intention and its consequences may be discussed among the GM and players and changed.
- **Initiation:** The player has committed his character to the task, and no changes can be made now. The dice hit the table.
- **Execution:** The character completes his action. The player looks to see how well the character did on the Success Level Chart.
- **Effect:** The players and GM decide what the effect of the task is, whether success fully completed or not.

Now, that sounds like a lot to go through every time you roll the dice. Normally, this all happens without thinking too much about it, making it quick. A player states, “My character’s going to do something,” he rolls dice, everyone looks to see how the character did, and a decision about what happened occurs.

The reason I bring up the four steps is because if you never think about them, you can cause tension among the players and GM. Imagine a player, Joe, stating, “Jack, my character, hits the priest right in the chest with a sword blow.” Now, following the four steps, you realize this has not happened in the game, but is just Joe stating his intention. (While his statement was technically incorrect, in that he stated it happened, and it was an intention, this is a common way of stating intention in role-playing games.)

Carrying on with this example, though, what if the GM is confused about the four steps? He may take this as initiation, for example, and when he says, “The priest grabs his black mace,” Joe might want his character Jack to back off. If the GM thinks the above statement was initiation, though, Joe can’t do this, and may get angry at the GM for withholding the information that the priest had this mace.

And in the end, what if the group is confused about effect? If Joe’s roll is successful, a confused group might think that Joe’s stated intention for Jack is exactly what happens. This is not necessarily so: the outcome of the dice and disposition of the players might determine a different effect.

The point is this: take your time to make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to a character performing a task. While the first game or two might run a bit slower than normal because steps are being heavily delineated, the speed will pick up as everyone gets used to following them.

Types of Ability Checks and how they work

While the Ability Check is the core mechanic that ties this entire game together, it actually comes in several forms, each of which add on a layer of complexity.

The first and most simple type is the unopposed Ability Check. This is used when a player wants his character to try a task in which no other character is attempting any action which would stop him. There are four steps to the unopposed Ability Check, and all other types of Ability Checks.

First, the player states the character’s intention. This should be easy: “Pieter is going to try to climb that boulder” is a good example.

Second, the Story Guide sets the difficulty of the Ability Check. This is determined simply. If the task is one that any person could do, even if unlikely, the difficulty is Mediocre. The player must get a Mediocre or better result on the Success Level Chart in order to succeed. If the task is one that requires specialized training or information, the difficulty is Good.

An example will clarify this further. Let’s use climbing - it always seems to illustrate this well. The difficulty is Mediocre to climb anything an untrained person could climb, no matter how much effort is required. A tree, a fence, a wall, the side of a house, or a rocky mountain can all be climbed by amateurs. The difficulty is Good if the climbing would normally require specialized training. A hundred-yard sheer rock face usually requires knowledge of belaying, rope use, pitons, and the like. An amateur might, under optimal conditions, make it, but generally this requires training. Therefore, it is of Good difficulty to climb a sheer rock face of any height.

The third step is determining circumstances. This is where bonus and penalty dice come into play. Characters may often have either bonus or penalty dice because of Secrets activated, pools spent, damage taken, or The Gift of Dice, as shown below. In addition to any bonus or penalty dice outlined elsewhere in these rules, the

Story Guide may assign one or two penalty dice to any Ability Check. One penalty die may be assigned if circumstances render a task especially difficult. A penalty die would not be assigned to our example climber above if it were drizzling, or dark, or a bit chilly, but one could be assigned if there was an icy wind and hard rain coming down at night. Two penalty dice can be assigned in the very worst of circumstances. A good measure of whether to assign two penalty dice is if the description of the circumstances elicits a stream of profanity from a player. We're talking about seriously nasty conditions here - hail coming down in the midst of an icy rain while gale-force winds tear at our poor climber in the pitch dark.

The fourth and last step is actually rolling the dice. If the total on the Success Level Chart is equal or better than the difficulty, the character has succeeded. The Story Guide and players should use the Success Level to describe how the character performed at the stated intention.

The next type of Ability Check is the competitive Ability Check. This occurs when two or more characters are attempting the same task, but each wants to do it better or faster. All rules for the standard Ability Check apply, and in addition, the conditions of victory are set before the Ability Check: if the Check is over a foot-race, the victor went the fastest; if it's composing a song, the victor made a better piece of work. This should be fairly obvious, but the Story Guide and players can decide together what the conditions of victory are if there's any question.

All players with competing characters make Ability Checks. After Ability Checks are made, any character who succeeded actually completed the task with some proficiency and the player can use the Success Level to compute any relevant outcomes. The character of the player with the highest total score, however, completed the task better or faster, and the other characters are ranked in the order of their players' rolls. In the case of a tie, the characters' feats are so close in speed and quality that a winner cannot be determined between them. They can either tie, or if the players and Story Guide want to, those players can roll again to see which is the victor.

The last type of Ability Check is the resisted Ability Check. This Check, most common in role-playing games, occurs when two characters attempt tasks that would cancel out each other. Examples include:

- One character swinging a sword at another character dodging.
- One character trying to get information by twisting another character's arm, who is attempting to suffer through the pain.
- One character sneaking up on a character who is keeping watch.
- One character offering a romp in bed to a character who is trying to deny the pleasures of the flesh.

All normal Ability Check rules apply to resisted Checks. The two players involved make their Ability Checks and then compare their scores. The higher of the two wins: in the case of a tie, the instigator of the action loses.

When narrating a resisted Ability Check, both players' Success Levels come into account. For purposes of computing results, the winner's Success Level is used, but the loser's efforts are still significant. An example:

The character Violet, played by Kim, is attempting to drive the character Lore, played by Wilhelm, to his knees with a savage sword attack. Upon rolling, Kim ends up with an Amazing Success Level, and Wilhelm ends up with a Great Success Level. Kim's roll wins, but Lore still made a great block. The action is narrated as, "Violet brings up her sword and makes a vicious stroke down, aiming for the lower leg. Lore, anticipating the swing, throws his shield in the way, but the sword crashes down it, the force driving the shield itself back into Lore's shins as he falls."

The losing player must abide by the winner's stated intention for the Ability Check, even if it was "I kill that sorry character." That's not entirely true, though: what sort of game would this be if your character could die from one roll of the dice? To see how to extract your character from any sticky situation you don't like, see "Bringing Down the Pain" below.

Using abilities together

If you want your character to perform a complex action that uses two abilities together, decide with the GM which ability is most appropriate to the action and which is secondary. The secondary ability is used first and the Success Levels are used as bonus dice on the second Ability Check. The GM and player will have to decide what happens if the first Ability Check is failed: in some situations, the second Ability Check can still be attempted without harm; in others, the Ability Check can be attempted with a penalty die; and in others still, the second Ability Check cannot be attempted.

A character is trying to cut a thong from a guard's belt and snatch his keys, using Swords to chop the thong, and Stealth to grab the keys without being seen. While he is using Swords to actually get the keys free, the Stealth part of the action is most important. The player makes a Swords Ability Check. If successful, the Success Levels are converted to bonus dice on the Stealth Ability Check. If unsuccessful, however, the keys are still on the guard's belt, so the Stealth Ability Check cannot be attempted.

Another character wants to approach a wild bear without getting attacked using Animal Ken. In order to help with this, he's going to attempt to remember what bears like to eat and see if he can find some, using Woodcraft. The Woodcraft Ability Check is secondary, and if successful, will add bonus dice to the Animal Ken Ability Check. If unsuccessful, there is no complication; the character just must approach the bear with no food gift.

The Gift of Dice

At the beginning of each session of the game, every player including the Story Guide receives a number of gift dice equal to the number of players at the table. At any point during the game, one of these dice can be given to another player to be added as a bonus die to that player's current Ability Check. This is most often used when a player's character is attempting something especially dangerous, or the player describes his character's intention in a cool way.

These gift dice are an important part of play and should not be forgotten. They encourage cooperation among the players as much as among the characters.

Bringing Down the Pain

Simple Ability Checks are well and good, and make resolution in The Shadow of Yesterday a quick and painless matter. Sometimes, though, for that dramatic punch, you need something a bit more gritty and focused. In this game, that is an expanded resolution system called Bringing Down the Pain. Bringing Down the Pain is a unique option for players to allow them to not only get out of sticky situations, but focus the story where they want it.

Any player involved in a conflict can Bring Down the Pain after a resisted Ability Check. Normally, a player has to abide by the results of this check. However, when a character belonging to a player - a player that is not the Story Guide - loses at a resisted Ability Check, that player does not have to accept the outcome. Instead, he can ask that the Pain be Brought Down. On the flip side, a player can demand this even when he

succeeds at a resisted Ability Check. This not only allows him to zoom in the imagined camera on this conflict, but is the only way to permanently injure or get rid of a major named character controlled by the Story Guide.

The Story Guide cannot Bring Down the Pain. He can request it, but another player involved in the conflict must actually declare it.

When a player declares they are Bringing Down the Pain, action breaks down into a round-by-round, gritty basis similar to some RPGs' combat systems. The loser of the simple resisted Ability Check must immediately accept damage to his character equal to the winner's Success Level (see "Damage" below). Both sides of the conflict must make certain their intention - their goal - is clarified and well-stated, for it is very important here. This intention must be clear, but can allow room for differing actions to achieve the goal: "drive away these opponents in battle," "embarrass the noble in front of his peers," or "out-perform this guy on the guitar" are all fine intentions.

After intentions are stated, everyone who has a character involved in the conflict should state what their action will be. Actions can be changed during this stage, where everything, even actions hidden to the characters, is discussed in the open. (In Ron Edwards' Trollbabe, this is called the free-and-clear stage.)

After the free-and-clear stage, everyone rolls Ability Checks for their action. If two characters are taking action against each other, this is a resisted Ability Check. The loser at this Check takes damage equal to the Success Level of the Check, possibly modified by Secrets and weapons. This is true even if the actions are unrelated: if Carlotta is swinging a sword at Daniel, and Daniel's trying to talk her out of it, their players roll against each other and the loser's character takes damage. If a character is taking action against someone who is not taking action against him, that's a normal unresisted Ability Check, and the target will definitely take damage if this Check is successful.

When all rolls are resolved, another free-and-clear stage begins. This continues until one side of the conflict gives up, at which time the winners' intention happens. The trick to Bringing Down the Pain lies in this rule: in any free-and-clear stage, a player can announce that he is changing his character's intention completely. This could change from "sneak up on my enemy" to "kill my enemy," "best the queen in a war of words" to "seduce the queen," or even "out-play this guy on the guitar" to "magically put this guy to sleep." He does not have to state the new intention until the next free-and-clear stage. During the next volley of rolls, he may only defend against one attack, and will deal no damage if he succeeds.

Surprise

Surprise is not part of the Bringing Down the Pain system. Instead, it takes place before-hand. If a character acts against another, and the latter has no clue what's going on, the player will not be able to make an Ability Check to resist. This still counts as a resisted Ability Check, and the player can announce that he'd like to Bring Down the Pain.

Damage and defeat

"Damage" in The Shadow of Yesterday does not necessarily refer to physical, blood-and-guts rending of flesh and bone. Instead, it is a quality of both the character in the context of the game world and the character in context of the real world. Damage is a count-down of when a player loses control over his character, and can be expressed as any of these things in-game:

- Cuts and bruises
- Fatigue and weariness
- Embarrassment and crushed esteem
- Loss of concentration and will

Whenever a player loses in an Ability Check while Bringing Down the Pain, his character takes damage. The base damage is equal to the Success Level of the acting player's roll, which can be modified by Secrets or weapons. Again, the type of action being done against the character does not matter - you can take damage from seduction as easily as you can from a sword.

When damage is taken, the player must make an Ability Check using his character's Stay Up ability. This roll, called a Damage Check, is the only exception to the standard Ability Check in the game. This roll must equal or beat the amount of current damage the character has. If it does not, the character is bloodied. When the character is bloodied, the player takes a penalty die to every Ability Check except the Damage Check.

If a second Damage Check is failed, the character is broken. In order for the character to perform any action, even defense, the player must spend a point from the ability's associated pool, and the player still receives one penalty die to this action. Any successful action taken against the character succeeds when he is broken.

The player does get one benefit when his character is bloodied or broken: he can immediately change the character's intention in the conflict without spending a turn doing so.

At any point during Bringing Down the Pain, a player may decide that the damage taken is enough for this conflict and give up. Before a free-and-clear stage, the player gives up the conflict, and his opponent's intention occurs. It is often a good idea to give up before your opponent's intention becomes more deadly, as shown in the example below.

In this example, there are two players, Matt and Emily. The pertinent parts of their two characters are:

'Emily's character:' Tela, a Zaru assassin. Her pools are currently at Vigor 2, Instinct 2, and Reason 1. Her pertinent abilities are Reaction 6, Stay Up 3, Sneak 6, Deceit 3, and Knife Fighting 3.

'Matt's character:' Gael, a noble from Ammeni. His pools are currently at Vigor 5, Instinct 1, and Reason 3. His pertinent abilities are Reaction 4, Stay Up 4, Sense Danger 5, Dash 4 and Viper-Blade 8.

Gael is traveling down an alley-way when Tela sights him, and slides into the shadows to follow him. Emily states, "I want Tela to sneak up on this guy." She makes a resisted Ability Check of Sneak versus Gael's Sense Danger and rolls a 4 versus his 6, for a total of 10 versus 11. "Screw that," she says, and spends a point of Instinct to roll a bonus die. Matt has the same opportunity, but wants to conserve his Instinct pool, since it's low. She ends up with a roll of 9, for a total of 15 - a Great success!

Up until this point, the action has been taken care of by a simple Ability Check. According to the Check, Emily wins, and Tela will sneak up on Gael, giving Emily three bonus dice to perform an action that uses that advantage. Matt's not having it, though: he wants his character out of here, and away from Tela. He says, "No way. I'm not accepting that outcome. It's time to Bring Down the Pain. My goal is for Gael to notice Tela, and get away from her." He immediately marks three damage for Gael on his character sheet, since Emily had a Success Level of 3. Since Gael's Stay Up ability is 4, he doesn't have to roll to see if Gael does stay up. Emily decides to

keep her intention of sneaking up on Gael.

During the free-and-clear phase, Matt says, “Ok, Gael stops for a moment and scans the area as the hair on the back of his neck stands up.” Notice that Gael knows something’s wrong; that’s because Matt refused the outcome of the simple Ability Check. Also notice that Matt can narrate whatever he wants for Gael’s action, as long as it stays within his goal. Emily, confident in her character’s abilities, says “I’m going to creep along the wall slowly towards him, staying in the shadows.” Another roll is made of Gael’s Sense Danger versus Tela’s Sneak, and Matt wins this check too, with a Success Level of 2 (Good). Tela takes two damage, and does not yet have to roll to stay up.

Matt says, “A-ha! Gael sees a glimmer in the shadows behind him, and starts to move quickly away from it.” Emily asks the Story Guide, “If I throw some rocks to make noise ahead of Gael, can I count them as a weapon, +1 damage to deceive him about my location?” The Guide agrees that the idea’s sound, and Emily says, “Tela scoops up some pebbles and throws them ahead of Gael, trying to confuse him as to her location.” Her Deceit’s pretty low, so she spends her one point of Reason for a bonus die, and nails it, beating Matt’s Sense Danger Ability Check 15 to 13, scoring Success Level 3 (Great). With the +1 weapon, that’s four more points of damage to Gael, totalling seven.

Matt now has to make a Stay Up roll, and nearly fails it. Initially, he scores a total of six, but spends a point of Vigor to get a bonus die, and ends up with a total of 10. He says, “As Gael takes off forward, a sound rattles him, and he spins, looking confused, but shakes it off.”

Emily says gleefully, “Seeing the Ammenite’s confusion, Tela dives and rolls across the alley to get behind him.” Matt’s worried, but thinks the dice have got to go his way. He says, “Gael spins around, scanning the area for the unseen intruder.” Just to be careful, he spends a point from his Instinct pool for a bonus die. They roll, and he gets a 12! Unfortunately, the dice are hot for Emily, and she gets 12 too; she’s got a grand total of 18 - a Legendary success!

Taking five more points of damage, Gael’s hurt with 12 points total. Matt makes his Stay Up check, but only gets five total. Gael is now bloodied, and has a penalty die to all actions. “Crap,” he mutters. “I’m changing my intention. Gael’s just going to high-tail it, trying to avoid danger.”

Emily’s grinning from ear to ear. “As Gael runs, Tela’s going to flit from shadow to shadow, staying right behind him.” They roll, his Dash now versus her Sneak. Dash uses Vigor for its pool, so Matt spends a point. Again, Emily wins: her roll comes up as a Good success, and Gael takes two more points damage. The Damage Check is not good, and with another failure from Matt, Gael is broken. Emily narrates, “Tela moves so quickly, she gets in front of Gael before he can notice. As he runs, he comes face to face with the assassin.”

It’s Matt’s turn, but Gael will have to spend a point from a pool in order to perform any action whatsoever. If he gives up, though, Tela will have cornered him, which he doesn’t want, especially not this damaged. He glowers, “Gael’s running as fast as he

can.” Emily smiles, “I’m changing intention if he’s going to run.” Mat figures that he can beat her in a foot-race, so he goes ahead, and spends a point and rolls Dash, with a penalty die still, versus Tela’s Reaction: she could not sneak, but only defend this turn. With a low roll from Emily, he wins, scoring a mere Mediocre Success Level. The one point of damage doesn’t trigger a Damage Check from Emily.

In the next free-and-clear phase, Emily says, “Screw this. Want to know my intention? I’m killing this Ammenite.”

Matt’s in a real sticky situation now. He’s got a plan, though: with plenty more points in Vigor, he can change his intention, and spend his last point of Instinct to defend when Tela attacks Gael this turn, which he knows she will. His Viper-Blade is awesome, and his weapon’s +2 versus Zaru. It’s risky, but if he gives up this turn, Gael’s dead, and he thinks he can scare Emily by dealing some serious damage next turn. He says, “Gael falls back, baffled and frightened by the sudden raise of a dagger. I’m changing intention.” Emily says, “Tela brings the dagger in, stabbing at Gael.” The roll is tense, 13 to 12 total, with Matt losing. With Gael broken, Tela’s intention is successful. Emily says, “The dagger drives deep into the heart of the land-thief, and his blood pours on the ground.”

Multiple characters in a conflict

For simple Ability Checks, having multiple characters involved is easy to handle. If the characters are using varying abilities, each building to help another one, it’s handled like one character using abilities together. Decide the order the checks have to be performed in, and have each player roll, with Success Levels being added as bonus dice to the next player’s roll. As with one character, failure at an Ability Check may mean that the overall action cannot continue, that the next player must roll a penalty die on his Ability Check, or that the checks may continue, with no penalty dice.

If multiple characters are using the same, or fairly equivalent, abilities to perform a task together, use the method above, with the following caveats:

Failure always means the next player adds a penalty die to his roll.

Always roll from the character with the highest ability to the character with the least ability.

If a penalty die is given from the Story Guide because of difficulty, it applies to all rolls.

This does mean that having a character weak with the ability helping may hinder the task.

Mike, Wil, and Susan are going to have their characters Miska, Wolf-Snarl, and Skala try to open a stuck door together. All of them are using Bash and Hold to do this, pushing against the door with their shoulders. Their scores are:

- Wolf-Snarl: Bash and Hold 7
- Skala: Bash and Hold 5
- Miska: Bash and Hold 1

Wil rolls 6, plus Wolf-Snarl’s Bash and Hold of 7 for a total of 13 - Success Level 2. With two bonus dice, Susan rolls a 10, plus Skala’s Bash and Hold of 5 for a total of 15 - Success Level 3. Finally, with three bonus dice, Mike rolls a 7, plus Miska’s Bash

and Hold of 1, for an 8 - a Failure.

Wil has Wolf-Snarl growl, “Out of my way, weakling,” and grab the door alone. Even with a roll of 4, Wolf-Snarl scores Success Level 1 and yanks the door open.

If Bringing Down the Pain is the ultimate way to test two differing wills, how do you manage it when more people want to get in on the fun? The standard way is easy: whenever one player declares that he wants to Bring Down the Pain, any character around can get involved. Part of the declaration of intention is who you’re planning to affect: your character can only damage that character until you change intention. The Bringing Down of the Pain does not end until only one character is left standing, or all the other players have given up.

The Zeitgeist method of group Pain-Bringing may be an easier and more fun way to arbitrate these situations. If everyone on one side of a conflict has a similar intention towards the other side, you can use the above rules for a group Ability Check when everyone is using similar abilities. In the Zeitgeist mode, anyone can spend from their pools to help anyone else, and damage taken is distributed by the losing side among their characters however they like. Whenever a character is broken, his player falls out of the group Pain-Bringing.

Healing

In the next scene after being damaged, a player may make a Healing Check for his character to recover from damage. This is a Stay Up Ability Check, and dice from any pool can be spent to add bonus dice to the roll. The Success Level obtained is the amount of damage that can be subtracted. Any success on this roll results in the character moving to a less damaged state of being: from broken to bloodied, or bloodied to normal.

Outside of this, Healing Checks can be made in the following situations:

- After a full night’s rest for the character.
- Upon expenditure of five points from any mix of pools.

Weapons and armor

Ah, weapons and armor - the love of any player, and an oft-fetishized part of any role-playing game. In The Shadow of Yesterday, damage is, as shown above, an erosion of a character’s ability to get his way, instead of always being physical pain and suffering. Therefore, weapons aren’t just swords, knives, clubs, and the like, and armor isn’t just padding a character wears on his body. Anything can be a weapon - but only in certain situations.

Weapons add to the Success Level of a successful action. Armor subtracts from the Success Level of a successful action done to your character. In both cases, the items can have +1, +2, or +3 ratings. The level of the rating is determined by the specificity of the damage or protection.

Weapons and armor with a +1 rating work in specific situations determined by action taken, and often ability used. Examples include:

- A sword that gives +1 damage in combat.
- A royal crest that provides +1 protection when involved in diplomacy.
- A lute that deals +1 damage in attempts to win a crowd while playing it.

Weapons and armor with a +2 rating work in situations with a specific type of people, environment, or other restrictions. Examples include:

- A mace that gives +2 damage against “hard” armors, like plate or chain.
- The Seal of Maldor, which provides +2 protection against the law in Maldor.
- A set of snowshoes, which deal +2 damage in attempts to race across snowy areas.

Weapons and armor with a +3 rating work in rare situations or against particular persons. Examples include:

- A dagger forged to kill the Potentate of Ammeni, which deals +3 damage in attempts to kill him.
- A writ of birthday immunity, which gives +3 protection against any attempt to prosecute a person for crimes committed on their birthday.
- A set of goggles which give +3 damage while trying to see motion during an eclipse.

An item can have more than one bonus - it can have up to three +1, two +2, and one +3 bonus.

Weapons and armor can occur in the game in two ways. The Story Guide can declare any item in the game to give +1 damage or protection in a particular situation. Alternatively, any player can declare his character's equipment to have a bonus with the Secret of Imbuement. This purchase is subject to Story Guide approval.

Pool refreshment

Whenever an attribute is not at its full level, it can be refreshed, restoring it to its full level by the character performing an in-game action.

Vigor is refreshed by eating a hot meal and spending a night in revelry. Drinking liquor, taking part in exuberant sex, using drugs, or going to a loud and wild music performance are all good examples.

Instinct is refreshed by performing a substantial act of physical exertion for purposes of enjoyment or exercise, not because of danger. This could be anything from a five-mile run to a night of dancing to spending a morning in the cold hunting elk.

Reason is refreshed by engaging in a substantial act of intellectual stimulation, such as having an intelligent argument with someone, going to a play, or reading a book for a few hours.

Crunchy Bits

Abilities

Each ability in The Shadow of Yesterday has an associated pool, a pool which can be drawn on in order to give a bonus die to use of the ability. This is noted when naming abilities like this: Ability Name (Pool).

Innate Abilities

Every character in The Shadow of Yesterday has four innate abilities: natural reactions and quantifications of the character's physical and mental stability. They are:

Athletics (Vigor)

This is a measure of raw physicality and fitness. It is used for running, jumping, swimming, or any other strength-based task not listed as a separate ability.

Reaction (Instinct)

This measures the quickness of a character's body and mind. It is as much "how quick the character notices something" as "how quick the character moves." It is used in a variety of situations, from who goes first in Bringing Down the Pain, to dodging blows, to noticing danger.

Resist (Reason)

"Resist" is the strength of a character's will, and is used to prevent compulsion of a natural or supernatural type. This includes physical compulsion: "Resist" would be used for a character to keep his cool under torture, for example.

Stay Up (Special)

"Stay Up" may well be the most unique ability in the game. In one sense, it answers the question, "how much damage can this character take?" Since damage isn't solely of the physical variety in The Shadow of Yesterday, though, it is as much a measure of "how much suffering this character will take before he gives up." "Stay Up" does not have an associated pool: instead, all pools are associated with it. When a character is damaged, the associated pool for "Stay Up" is the same as the associated pool for the ability used to damage the character.

Other Abilities

While The Shadow of Yesterday has a full setting, and plenty of pre-made abilities and rules that go with that, you should never forget that it's your setting. Story Guides and players are encouraged to make up their own abilities, Secrets, and Keys.

Open Abilities follow a few guidelines:

- They are either innate abilities to a person (Climbing) or things that can be easily learned. Usually, they're both, as in the aforementioned case of Climbing, or Scrapping.
- They are rather wide in scope, encompassing a field of actions, without being overly broad. Movement is too broad; Climbing Fences is too narrow. Fighting is too broad; Broad-sword Usage is too narrow.
- They are not specialized knowledge that applies only to a certain people or culture. These are the Species and Cultural Abilities, which are much more narrow in scope.

The pre-made Open Abilities are below. Examine them to get ideas for your own.

Artistic Abilities

Freeload (Instinct)

Freeload is used to get free meals and shelter. Your character can't really get wealthy using Freeload, but you can manage to survive even if broke, which isn't bad.

Create (Instinct)

Create is used for painting, sculpting, and other arts where a concrete item is created.

Story-tell (Reason)

Story-tell is used for creating or telling stories, including ballads.

Music (Instinct)

Music is used for singing and playing instruments, and represents musical talent, not lyrical talent. Music and Story-tell are often used together to make an effective song.

Craft Abilities

Haggling (Instinct)

Haggling is used to get the best price for goods. In the world of Near, coinage doesn't really exist, and this is used to make sure you get a fair trade in barter, which means it can be used to evaluate the quality and worth of goods as well.

Fine Crafts (Reason)

Fine Crafts is used for leatherworking, woodworking, and other crafts that require fine manipulation.

Rough Crafts (Vigor)

Rough Crafts is used for stonecutting, forging, and other crafts that require a great deal of strength.

Complex Crafts (Reason)

Complex Crafts is used for any task that requires a great deal of steps or mixing of different materials, ranging from building clocks and locks to cooking.

Fighting Abilities

First Aid (Reason)

If someone's been physically hurt, this can be used to give them bonus dice in a Healing Check.

Scrapping (Instinct)

Untrained fighting is the center of this Ability. Fists, feet, daggers, kitchen knives, table legs, and all sorts of clubbery are usually used in Scrapping.

Bash and Hold (Vigor)

Bash and Hold is a specialized strength-based skill, used to represent sheer power. It is used for holding doors shut, breaking doors down, lifting heavy things, bending bars, and wrestling other characters.

Ability breadth

Remember in the introduction when I told you there's no realism enforced in this game? I meant it. If you've ever played another RPG, you might look at Complex Crafts and think, "Why can my master chef character fix clocks?" It's a good question, but the answer is simple: "He can't unless you decide he can." You decide what your character is good at with Craft and Artistic skills, and if he picks something up later, that's great. You don't have to quantify this: you don't have to write down "cooking" when you take Complex Crafts. Just play your character as you envision him, and if it's thematically interesting for your chef character to fix a clock, go for it.

Battle (Reason)

Battle is the basic skills and tactics known by any military commander. It is used for giving orders in combat and planning attacks, including ambushes.

Illicit Abilities

Stealth (Instinct)

Stealth is used to sneak up on people, hide from other characters, and conceal objects on your character's body.

Theft (Instinct)

Theft is used for picking pockets, cutting purses, lockpicking, breaking and entering without being noticed, and safecracking, as well as any other theft-related activity.

Deceit (Reason)

Deceit is used to fool other characters, including pretending to be someone else, by outfit or by imitation, forge a document, or straight-out lie well.

Streetwise (Reason)

Streetwise is used to know information about the illegal underground, including where to buy illegal things, sell stolen goods, or know who controls organized crime.

Outdoor Abilities

Climbing (Vigor)

Climbing is used for climbing anything that requires rope or is especially difficult, or more than twice as tall as the character. This is basically rock climbing or tall tree climbing. Getting over a short fence or even onto the roof of a one-story house is covered by Athletics.

Aim (Vigor)

Aim is used for shooting bows and crossbows and throwing objects.

Woodcraft (Reason)

Woodcraft is used to track people or animals, know what sorts of plants and animals are present in an area and their properties, as well as set traps.

Animal Ken (Instinct)

Animal Ken is the social skill for dealing with animals, and is used to deal with domesticated animals or wild ones, as well as riding animals. Domesticated animals are much easier to control, of course, and this may be used to give them commands. For wild animals, on the other hand, this works about as far as scaring them off, or convincing them not to eat you.

Priestly Abilities

Pray (Vigor)

Pray is used for meditation, blessing actions, and performing religious rituals. It involves the character's belief that he is connected to something better than him.

Counsel (Reason)

Counsel is used to bring peace to someone via private conversation, not unlike mental health counseling. It is the spiritual equivalent of First Aid.

Discern Truth (Reason)

Discern Truth is used to tell if someone is being honest, or read a person's intentions.

Orate (Instinct)

Orate is used to sway opinion with speech or demagoguery, and is generally used with crowds.

Social Abilities

Sway (Instinct)

Sway is used to sway individuals through conversation. Unlike Orate, this works better one-on-one, and the character being swayed may not even realize your character's intentions.

Savoir-Faire (Instinct)

Savoir-Faire is used to act smooth, dance, get a kiss from a lady, and get another character into your character's bedchambers.

Etiquette (Reason)

Etiquette is used to know your way around a society, including knowing who is important and where to get favors. It is the non-illegal society equivalent of Streetwise.

Dueling (Vigor)

Dueling is the art of honorable one-on-one battle. Almost every culture has its rituals for physically solving problems, which usually involve a sword.

Secrets

Secrets are special qualities your character has that let him do extraordinary things. They generally work in the following ways:

- Permanently get a bonus die to a specific use of an ability.
- Permanently get +1 damage or protection with an ability.
- Permanently get a minor unusual ability. This ability may require a skill use.
- Spend one die from a pool to use an ability in an unusual way.
- Spend two or three dice from a pool to use an ability in a supernatural or powerful unusual way.
- Spend as many dice from a pool for a scalable effect. If this effect is especially powerful or unusual, it may carry a cost of extra dice.

Most of the Secrets I've pre-made for The Shadow of Yesterday follow the above guidelines, but not all. Look at the ones below, and examine them for ideas for your own.

Open Secrets

Secret of Enhancement (Ability)

You must select an ability when you take this Secret. You may spend as many points out of the associated pool to give bonus dice to the ability as you like.

Secret of Speciality (Skill)

You must select an ability when you take this Secret. Choose a speciality your character has within that ability - for example, cooking pastries for the Complex Crafts skill. You always have a bonus die when your character attempts an action that falls within that speciality. Cost: none.

Secret of Languages (Specific language)

Your character knows a language outside his homeland's.

Secret of Scribing

Your character can read and write any language he knows.

Secret of the Signature Weapon

Your character has one weapon with which he is bonded. You gain a bonus die to any action taken with that weapon and any other character else attempting to use the weapon receives a penalty die. Cost: nothing. (Note: to change this weapon, this Secret must be taken again.)

Secret of Imbuement

Add a bonus to one of your character's weapons or armor, according to the rules in Chapter 4: Playing the Game.

Secret of Contacts

Your character knows all sorts of people in all sorts of places. You can use this Secret once per session for your character to automatically know a non-player character in the adventure. You may describe the relationship in a short phrase, such as "old enemy," "wartime buddy," "ex-lover," but the Story Guide gets to decide the history and current disposition of the relationship. Cost: 3 points from a pool determined by the Story Guide. Vigor would fit for a wartime buddy, Instinct for an ex-lover, and Reason for a former colleague in your character's field of study.

Secret of Blessing

With a successful Pray Ability Check, your character may bless the actions of a group. You must state a specific goal for them to accomplish. Your Success Level with this Ability Check is a pool of bonus dice any member of this group can use in accomplishing this task. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Secret of Mighty Blow

Your character can strike with extreme might. Spend as many dice of Vigor as you like to increase the damage of a blow in combat.

Secret of Disarm

Your character can disarm an opponent, without changing intentions, with a successful Ability Check using a weapon in Bringing Down the Pain. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Secret of Throwing

Anything is a dangerous missile in your character's hands. He can throw anything fist-sized to greatsword-sized as an attack, using the Aim ability. Cost: 1 Vigor/10 feet thrown.

Secret of Knock-back

Your character's blows send people flying. Knock back a stricken character one yard per Success Level. Cost: 2 Vigor.

Secret of Shattering

The weight of your weapon can be used to destroy other weapons and armor in combat. With a successful attack, your Success Level (not including any damage bonuses) is removed from the damage bonuses of weapons or damage reductions of armor. If reduced to 0, the item is destroyed. Cost: 2 Vigor.

Secret of Flying Leap

Your character can make amazing leaps. Using this Secret, he jumps 10 yards per Success Level in a Athletics Ability Check. Cost: 2 Vigor.

Secret of the Unwalked Path

Your character's footfalls leave little trace for others to follow. You can use your character's Woodcraft ability in resistance to anyone trying to track him. Cost: 1 Instinct.

Secret of Animal Speech

Your character can speak to an animal and understand its signals with a successful Animal Ken Ability Check. Cost: 2 Instinct.

Secret of the Hidden Pocket

Your character is adept at hiding objects on his person. No matter how carefully searched the character has been, he may pull an inexpensive, small (hand-sized) item off his person with a successful Stealth Ability Check. Cost: 2 Instinct.

Secret of the Sudden Knife

Your character is a master of the assassin's art. In a surprise attack, the victim is automatically bloodied if your character successfully hits. If he fails his Stay Up roll, he is automatically broken. Cost: 3 Instinct + 1 Vigor + 1 Reason.

Secret of Evaluate

Your character's battle experience has give him the ability to read an opponent well. Evaluate your character's opponent not in descriptive terms, but in game mechanics, on a successful Battle Ability Check. (You can ask for any of the following information, one bit per Success Level: Vigor score, Instinct score, best combat skill and score, specific skill and score.) Cost: 1 Reason.

Secret of Inner Meaning

Your character's art carries a meaning beyond the surface. Use any Instinct-based ability at a distance via a piece of your character's art. Cost: 2 Reason.

Secret of Herbal Health

Your character can always find an herb that is an effective healing agent with a successful Woodcraft Ability Check in the outdoors. The herb will automatically grant a Healing Check, with bonus dice equal to your Success Levels with this Skill Check. Cost: 2 Reason.

Secret of Quality Construction (Craft Ability)

You must choose a specific Craft Ability when you take this Secret. Your character can craft items of excellent quality. Any item your character creates using this Secret gives one bonus die to a particular ability when using the item, permanently. Cost: 3 Reason.

Keys

Keys are the motivations, problems, connections, duties, and loyalties that pull on your character. To the player, they're highly important because they generate experience points. Creating new Keys may be easier than new Abilities or Secrets - they follow very simple rules.

A Key must involve a motivation, problem, connection, duty, or loyalty.

Keys come in two types:

- Motivations. When the motivation is fulfilled in play, gain an experience point. When the motivation is fulfilled against good odds, gain three experience points.
- Everything else. When the Key comes up in play, gain an experience point. When the Key presents a minor problem, gain two experience points. When it presents a major problem, gain five experience points.

All Keys have a Buyoff, which is a reversal from the Key by the character. All Buyoffs give the character 10 experience points. This Buyoff occurs only when you, the player, wants it to happen: you can lose a battle with the Secret of Bloodlust and still keep the Secret. If you want your character to undergo a change in his personality, though, adding to the story, you can take this Buyoff by fulfilling it. If you do take the Buyoff, you can never take this Key again.

As always, see the pre-made Keys to get a feel for creating your own.

Open Keys

Key of Fraternity

Your character has someone he is sworn to, a friend who is more important than anyone else. Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character (maximum 3 per adventure). Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character defends them by putting himself at risk. Buyoff: Sever the relationship with this person.

Key of the Guardian

Your character has a ward, someone who depends on him for security and protection. Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character. Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character rescues them from harm. Buyoff: Sever the relationship with this person.

Key of the Vow

Your character has a vow of personal behavior that he has sworn not to break. This could be a dietary restriction, a requirement to pray at sunbreak every morning, or something else like that. Gain 1 XP for every adventure in which your character does not break this vow. Gain 2 XP every time your character does not break this vow even though it causes him minor harm or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time your character does not break this vow even though it causes him great harm. Buyoff: Break this vow.

Key of the Mission

Your character has a personal mission that he must complete. Gain 1 XP every time he takes action to complete this mission (2 XP if this action is successful.) Gain 5 XP every time he takes action that completes a major part of this mission. Buyoff: Abandon this mission.

Key of Faith

Your character has a strong religious belief that guides him. Gain 1 XP every time he defends his faith to others. Gain 2 XP whenever this character converts someone to his faith. Gain 5 XP whenever this character defends his faith even though it brings him great harm. Buyoff: Your character renounces his beliefs.

Key of Bloodlust

Your character enjoys overpowering others in combat. Gain 1 XP every time your character defeats someone in battle. Gain 3 XP for defeating someone equal to or more powerful than your character (equal or higher combat skill.) Buyoff: Be defeated in battle.

Key of Glittering Gold

Your character loves wealth. Gain 1 XP every time you make a deal that favors you in wealth. Gain 2 XP every time you finish an adventure with more wealth than you started with. Gain 5 XP every time you double your wealth. Buyoff: Give away everything you own except what you can carry lightly.

Key of the Coward

Your character avoids combat like the plague. Gain 1 XP every time your character avoids a potentially dangerous situation. Gain 3 XP every time your character stops a combat using other means besides violence. Buyoff: Leap into combat with no hesitation.

Key of Conscience

Your character has a soft spot for those weaker than their opponents. Gain 1 XP every time your character helps someone who cannot help themselves. Gain 2 XP every time your character defends someone with might who is in danger and cannot save themselves. Gain 5 XP every time your character takes someone in an unfortunate situation and changes their life to where they can help themselves. Buyoff: Ignore a request for help.

Key of Vengeance

Your character has a hatred for a particular organization, person, or even species or culture. Gain 1 XP every time your character hurts a member of that group or a lackey of that person. Gain 2 XP every time your character strikes a minor blow at that group or person (killing a member of the organization or one of the person's lackeys, disrupting their life, destroying their property). Gain 5 XP every time your character strikes a major blow at that group or person. Buyoff: Let your enemy go.

Key of the Masochist

Your character thrives on personal pain and suffering. Gain 1 XP every time he is bloodied and 3 XP every time he is broken. Buyoff: Flee a source of physical or psychic damage.

Running the Game

Designing an adventure

Key Scenes

The main experience engine in *The Shadow of Yesterday* are Keys, allowing players to decide exactly what sort of experiences in play they are most interested in. The Story Guide is just as much of a player, though, and so he controls a secondary experience engine: Key Scenes. Key Scenes are similar to some fantasy RPG experience systems in that they are particular junctures in the play session that the Story Guide has decided beforehand are worth experience to the characters: *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* is one game that uses this. These are not particular outcomes, though. “Saving the princess,” “killing or thwarting the evil overlord,” and “taming the wild beast” are not good examples of Key Scenes. Key Scenes should be tense, have multiple outcomes, and force players to make a decision for their characters. (In this, they are like Bangs from Ron Edwards’ *Sorcerer*.)

“Discovering the princess is trapped in a high tower,” “meeting the overlord,” and “confronting the wild beast” are good Key Scenes, as each can result in multiple outcomes and do not put restrictions on what the player decision is for his character. Key Scenes do not have to tie into any particular overarching plot or story-line; they can be light and humorous, or grim and serious.

Whenever a character is present in a Key Scene, he earns one to three experience points, as determined beforehand by the Story Guide. These experience points are given as soon as the scene is over.

Designing NPCs

Interesting non-player characters (NPCs) are the cornerstone of a good adventure. In their interactions with the players’ characters, they provide a mirror to reflect action and values. Before figuring out their mechanics, you should figure out their motivations and general reactions. This is easier than you might think: depending on the importance of their character to the story, you should be able to sum this up in one to three sentences.

Of extreme importance is a name for the character: first impressions are, as it’s said, lasting. I recommend making a list of common and uncommon names for the culture that your game is currently set in and having that by your side as a Story Guide. Pick names for your most important NPCs ahead of time; throwaway NPCs can have a name picked on the fly from the list.

Beasts

Beasts are the easiest NPCs of all to write up. Instead of having the normal gamut of abilities, they should have just these few.

Power (Vigor)

This is the animal’s strength and ferocity. Even animals, such as a tame buffalo, that do not normally attack people may have a high Prowess, as they’d whip some tail if provoked. This is used to attack other characters and smash things.

Prowess (Instinct)

This is the animal’s quickness and control. It is used to dodge blows, run away, and be fast like a rabbit.

Senses (Instinct)

This is self-explanatory: it is the animal’s ability to notice its surroundings.

Brain (Reason)

This is a measure of the animal's intelligence and will, and is used like Reason. While it may be a hinderance to domestication, it is also used for a domesticated animal to understand commands.

Stay Up (Special)

This is as per normal.

Beasts should have few, if any, points in their pools. One or two points in Instinct makes them a much more formidable foe, and one or two points in Vigor makes them devastating. No points should be in Reason unless the animal has very special properties.

An animal may have one or two Secrets to represent special abilities that it has, such as goring horns, or a prehensile tail. You can remove the cost from these Secrets if the ability is built in to the animal.

Punks and pogues

Your average run-of-the-mill scene filler NPC does not need to be fully fleshed out. Instead of creating a character from scratch, assign scores to Innate Abilities, plus one other ability, for the NPC. The Innate Abilities can be made more broad for this purpose: Athletics can be used to attack, Reaction to climb, and Resist to solve a riddle.

These guys should rarely, if ever, have points in their pools. One point makes them dangerous; two points makes them a real nuisance. Likewise with Keys, which they shouldn't have points to spend on, anyway: none is fine, while one or two makes them quite powerful.

Major NPCs

NPCs that you plan to have show up in the campaign more than once should be given a name, and fully fleshed out. The number of advances they have should be the average of the players' characters', plus or minus five.

When using these NPCs, though, their pools should be halved, as they do not have the chances to spend them that the players' characters do.

Running an adventure

Giving out experience points

As a Story Guide, you are responsible for binding the game together into an enjoyable narrative. You may be considered responsible by the players for their experience points and advancement. They are, of course, as wrong as they can be. When you see a player have his character act in a way that should earn him experience from a Key, feel free to announce that out loud. Feel just as free not to: that character is that player's creation, and he should well be playing attention to what's going on, and be invested in his character's advancement.

With the exception of Key Scenes, which you are responsible for, an ideal flow of experience point giving should go like this:

Jack, a player: My character, Willis, leaps forward, his ratkin legs kicking to land in front of the sword-blow coming down on Jeph. (rolls) Success! Hey, that hits one of my Keys. 3 experience, right?

Jennifer, the GM: A-yup.

Running a campaign

The Standard Advance

Before a campaign begins, the Story Guide and players need to decide how long they want the game to be, and how fast they want characters to advance. Each group, and each story, can work differently in these respects, and so *The Shadow of Yesterday* can be easily changed to accomodate this.

The standard advance, how many experience points it costs to buy an advance for a character, is normally set at 10 XP. This will accomodate a style of play where your character will gain one or two advances at every session, normally, which is pretty quick compared to most RPGs. I suggest moving this standard advance up in increments of 5 XP to change play speed. Set at 15 XP, characters will earn an advance every session or two; set at 20 XP, characters will earn, on average, an advance over two to three sessions; and set at 25 XP, characters will earn an advance every three or four sessions. It is not recommended to set the standard advance higher than 25 XP.

Character Transcendence

“Transcendent” is the result of an ability check result of 22. It signals the end of a character’s story, and is a special occasion for that character’s player. With this result, the player should feel free to narrate the outcome of his roll himself, with any help he likes from the other players and Story Guide. If the roll comes during *Bringing Down the Pain*, that ends immediately. If the scene is taking place during the day, the sun is eclipsed by the moon within the hour; if during the night, the moon is eclipsed by the sun.

The story should immediately focus upon the transcendent character. He has just accomplished a feat that will be spoke of by his companions forever, and the day is his. Within 24 game-hours of the moment he became transcendent, his story will be over. The character may die; he may retire for a quiet life; he may disappear over the hills or become something else entirely. His story will end and he will be retired from play.

This does not mean the campaign is over. The player may bring a new character into play after his current character leaves. This character may well be established during the day of transcendence, and carry on the legends of a character who has just had his most glorious moment.

The Species of Near

The Old Species

The “Old Species” are those which have been around and well-known in Near since before the coming of the Shadow, which are humans, goblins, and elves. The Old Species seem closely linked, for this reason: they are all in some way human. While the lines between humans, elves, and goblins are clear, individuals can move in between them. This is not necessarily common knowledge: no goblin would believe this, only the most astute human scholar have observed the phenomenon, and elves don't particularly like to talk about it.

Masters of War: Humans

Humans have the most variation of any species on Near, and as such, will be more detailed in the culture write-ups. There are some species-wide qualities worth noting, though.

Appearance and Personality

Humans come in every variety of color and appearance as they do on Earth. The humans of Near, however, tend towards darker skin tones: the lightest skin tone is a light olive, and blonde hair is rare. Exceptionally light-skinned people or blondes are regarded with some suspicion, as these qualities are normally associated with elves. Skin tone varies within nations and cultures, but as a rule, skin tones deepen as one travels north in the world of Near.

Human personalities are very tempered by culture. They are the most aggressive of all the species, though, even the beast-like Ratkin. Their superior numbers and role as the primary mover in Near history have much to do with this, as does a natural-born hubris. Coupled with their aggressiveness is a dangerous catalyst: fear. The Shadow has brought out the worst fears in humanity, and purges against other species, pogroms against their own kind, witch-hunts for “Shadow-touched” and other atrocities have been even more common.

Balancing human aggression is human passion. Humans have love - as we know it, at least - which is unique to their kind. It is, in fact, what makes humans human, and if a goblin or elf finds themselves in this state, they are on the fast track to finding out just how malleable their species identity is.

Religion and Magic

All human religions have some explanation of the Sky-Fire and the Shadow Moon. Most are not favorably inclined to it, and have become dualist good-versus-evil pantheons. The definition of evil is a primary impetus in many of the atrocities described above.

Human Species Abilities

Humans have no particular species abilities.

Human Species Secrets

Secret of Knowledge

Humans can learn and adapt better than any other species on Near. Choose one ability that is not currently rated at A. That ability is now rated at A for your character.

Secret of Heart's Release

Your character can refresh his Instinct pool in a new way. Whenever your character spends a few semi-private hours in the company of someone of his preferred sex, talking, flirting, and what not - when your character's basically on a old-timey date - or whenever your character has consensual sex, his Instinct pool is refreshed.

Human Species Keys

Key of Love

Your character has a deep love, whether friendly, erotic, or familial, for someone else. Gain 1 XP every time this character is present in a scene with your character. Gain 2 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 5 XP every time your character puts himself in harm's way or makes a sacrifice for them. Buyoff: Sever the relationship with this person.

Key of Unrequited Love

Your character has a love for someone who does not return this love. Gain 1 XP whenever your character has to make a decision that is influenced by them. Gain 2 XP every time your character attempts to win their affection. Gain 5 XP every time your character puts himself in harm's way or makes a sacrifice for them. Buyoff: Abandon your pursuit of this person or win their love.

Monsters of Heaven: Elves

Elves are mysterious, aloof human-like creatures. They claim immortality, and possess fearsome magic, allowing them to project their ego. Usually untrusted or revered, or both, they wander Near looking for an answer.

Appearance and Personality

For the most part, elves appear human-like. They create their own bodies from the power of their own self-image, so they can have any appearance they want at creation, but most stick with a similar appearance in each incarnation. Their skin tone, however, is always pale, ranging from bone-white to a very light olive, and their hair is light, ranging from blonde to a sandy brown or golden red. All elves have an aura, a small nimbus of light that shines around them. This aura is slight enough that it only shouts their presence under a pitch-black sky. It is noticeable enough, though, that anyone that does see an elf knows what it is.

Elves tend to be solitary creatures without roots. This is not to say that they are not social; they can be incredibly magnetic. They do not, however, usually settle down in one place and form lasting relationships. It is said that one cannot trust an elf for "whatever good he does, he does for his own purposes."

The Cycle of the Elf

Elves are people who have looked deep within and found only one thing there: the self. Dedicated like a Zen master, they have realized the world is illusory and the only truth is what one thinks of one's self. Upon the death of the body, these souls do not pass on, but return again and again, as a more perfect form.

This sort of worldview kind of shuts the door on most religion. The elf recognizes no god or greater power, only more powerful souls. Strangely, this sort of self-absorption doesn't always lead to evil: many elves roam the world doing good to either appease something inside them or perhaps for amusement. Others strike down anything in their path, realizing the insignificance of others that have not achieved their enlightenment. Whatever the attitude, an elf lives on, seeking to know itself deeper.

Sometimes, an elf strays from this path. They were once human, after all, although it's not too wise to mention that. Any time an elf recognizes another life as greater than his own, he falls from elfhood. If an elf either saves the life of another, dying or becoming mortally wounded in the process, or creates life - elves function sexually as humans - they become somewhat human. (If the elf died for another, he is reborn a last time.) Their aura dims and becomes grey, and they begin to get older like a human: they have entered the Grey Age. Other elves usually despise a Grey One for his weakness.

Elven Magic

The most powerful magic of the elf is the fact that it's immortal. Elves come into this world at maturity, and do not age unless they want to. Most do, over their many incarnations, as their self-image becomes more wizened. They do not catch diseases, although they can be poisoned. Their body is only a shell they have created, and even if struck down, they return to the world of Near.

An elf, if feeling introspective - and when aren't they? - may speak of Heaven. This may be the only religious belief elves have: that when they achieve perfect enlightenment, they will leave Near and enter perfect one-ness, when the illusion of Near disappears for them, and they see it for what it is, their own dream. This Heaven is as horrific of an idea to a human as it sounds - the elf sees himself as the dreamer of everything and everyone else, and he will take his true place in Heaven.

Elven magic manifests itself in other minor forms, however. Elven auras are very powerful and have many special abilities that protect the elf and project its will on others. The long age of an elf seems like magic to other peoples, as well: elves can draw on their many experiences to perform nearly any feat.

The Shadow Moon and the Elf

When the Sky Fire fell to Near, all elves disappeared. Not a single one was seen for over two hundred years. As to where they went, no one knows, not even the elves. Elves' stories are varied: most purport that they were always here and have no memory of leaving or those two hundred years, while others speak of Far, another world they are able to visit.

Whatever happened, elves are loathe to speak of it. Since they have returned, though, it is obvious the Shadow Moon has had an effect on them. Once elves were friendly towards each other, greeting other ones on the path to enlightenment. Once, when an elf was asked about the logical fallacy in two elves both thinking the universe is their dream, he said, "It is not known whether I am dreaming him dreaming the world, or he is dreaming me dreaming the world. Either way, we'd better get along." Now, though, elven friendliness is rare, and most elves despise the sight of another one. The power struggle to see who is truly the master of the dream has become intense. Some old elves blame the younger ones for the Sky Fire and Shadow Moon, claiming too many competing for the dream have threatened to tear it apart.

Elven Species Abilities

Innate Ability: Past Lives (Reason)

This is the elven ability to remember many abilities and bits of knowledge from the past. It can be used to remember facts about any ancient landmark or piece of history.

Elven Species Secrets

Secret of Immortality

When an elf character dies, it returns to Near within 28 days. The Story Guide and the character's player should decide together when the most appropriate and enjoyable time for the character to come back would be. No one has actually ever seen an elf return: it happens out of the sight of other people. The character loses a point of Reason, which may mean that he has to lose a point from each of his other pools. All abilities are lowered by one point as well; the process of reincarnation is not perfect and the elf's spirit must adjust to a new form. The player can choose to have his character not return from death. Whether this means the character has ascended to Heaven, or something else has happened, is completely up to that player and the Story Guide. This secret is mandatory for elven characters.

Secret of the Polymath

In an elf's life, many abilities have waxed and waned. Using this secret, the elf may use its Past Lives ability as any other ability for an entire scene. Cost: 3 Reason. In addition, the very next available advance the player spends must be used to improve this ability.

Secret of Fading the Illusion

An elf with this secret can, through force of will, make the illusion of the world temporarily grow dim and ghostly around him. To everyone else, it appears the elf has become translucent and incorporeal. This secret lasts for one scene. Cost: 3 Vigor.

Secret of the Iron Mind

Your character can refresh Reason whenever he defeats someone else in a one-on-one personal contest of any type, as long as it has been established as a contest between the two.

Aura of Protection

Your character's aura is palpable in the air, bringing a strange thickness to the air. When physically attacked, you can spend from your Reason pool to lower damage on a one-for-one basis.

Aura of the Emperor

Your character's aura waxes as he enforces his will, making him appear taller and more threatening. On any attempt to intimidate someone or convince them of your character's opinion, you may add a bonus die. Cost: 1 Reason.

Aura of Sight

Your character's aura is brighter than normal when close up, but no brighter when far away. This gives you a bonus die to any sight-based Ability Check at night.

Aura of the Tower

Your character's aura is polarized, giving it a weird light-and-dark flavor. Both Reason and Vigor are now associated with Resist, and you can spend from both of them for Ability Checks.

Elven Species Keys

Key of the Self

Your character is an elf, immortal and dedicated to the self. Gain 1 XP every time he ignores the request of another in order to fulfill his own goals. Gain 3 XP every time he ignores someone in need for himself. Buyoff: Become human. By either dying to save the life of another, or creating life, your character enters the Grey Age. All Elven Species Secrets and Keys, except Secret of the Polymath, are unusable.

Key of the Eternal Question

There is a reason for the illusion of Near, a purpose behind its entrapment of your character. Only when he answers this question will he be ready to be the master of all he dreams. Pick a philosophical question for your character. "What is the measure of a hero?" or "Can one know himself better through fulfillment or denial?" are good examples. Gain 1 XP every time you can apply this question to the situation your character's in. Gain 3 XP every time your character risks harm in pursuit of the answer. Buyoff: Answer the question.

Key of the Bloodline

No elf existing in Near today has humans that still remember his humanity. Some elves remember where they came from, though, and show their weakness through secretly shepherding their bloodline. Gain 1 XP every time your character is in a scene with one of his bloodline. Gain 2 XP every time he secretly manipulates a situation in their favor. Gain 5 XP every time he puts himself at risk to do so. Buyoff: Reveal who you are to your family.

Beasts of Hunger: Goblins

Most would call goblins debased: sick, twisted, addicted things with little morality. Goblins call this fun. Pure hedonists, goblins hunger for pleasure, trouble, and excitement.

Appearance and personality

Goblins are infinitely adaptable beings; their “natural” bodies, if you can call them that, manage to resemble demons, dogs, and men at the same time. They are mottled brown, black, green, and grey, and their hair grows randomly, in shape and color. Their bodies have an ability that cannot be explained by many: they evolve to match their environment even as they continue to age, and their offspring carry these same characteristics. Even strong magic and torture can warp their bodies, as many evil wizards have found, creating the dread ur-goblins, bugbears, and Violators from goblin stock. Most goblins are smaller and stouter than humans, although they can come in just about any size.

Goblins’ curiosity drives them into all the forgotten places of the earth, and makes them decent apprentices for just about any job: they catch on quickly, but tend to cause as many accidents as they do help. They’re easy to keep loyal, though: all goblins have an addiction, which if fed regularly, will make one your best friend. This addiction need not be to a drug: they can be addicted to a certain act, food, drink, or, well, drug. (A tale has been told of goblin divers on the shores of Maldor. These beasts were amazing pearl-finders, and were addicted to the rush of adrenaline they got when their human handler threw them off the cliff-side.)

Goblin society, family, and morality

Left alone, goblin societies resemble anarchy to any outsider, although they tend to grow an alpha goblin among any tribe. Any goblin tribe of more than about two dozen of the animals tends to fall apart without an outside master, usually human. Goblins are actually rather good at organizing to make sure everyone’s needs get met, but when they start to threaten each other’s resources, tribes quickly split into rivals.

Goblin families are very loose-knit. All goblins are poly-sexual, and any mating between them, whether male-male, male-female, or female-female, can generate offspring. With a month-long gestation period, this doesn’t really get in the way of their curious relations. The offspring are born as small, but capable goblins, emerging as little flesh-balls about a foot in diameter. Within an hour of their birth, they grow feet, hands, eyes, and a mouth. Young goblins pick another goblin in the tribe as their parent, randomly, and if that goblin doesn’t push them away, they usually learn the same addictions and behaviors.

Goblins do not understand the human concept of love. It’s an alien concept to them. They do understand mutual pleasure, of both the sexual and non-sexual form, and do actively work with each other. The greatest sins in goblin society are not wanting to trade - one goblin’s poison is another’s pudding - and betraying someone you’re working with.

A few goblins have been observed in a bizarre state that resembles love, however. When a goblin is struck with this, known only as “the Affliction” in their rough language, they leave their tribe and travel, their only goals to prove their love or die. (They seem confused by their own emotions, and usually cannot express clearly what they are doing.) A goblin has never been observed in love with another goblin, however; they always choose a member of another species as their object of affection.

Goblin Species Abilities

Innate Ability: Adaptability (Vigor)

The goblin can change its body structure and even mental capabilities on a fairly frequent basis. This ability can stand in for any other ability on the goblin's character sheet, under the circumstances described in the Secret of Adaptability.

Goblin Species Secrets

Secret of the Addiction

Your character is addicted to a substance or behavior. You cannot refresh any pools if it has been longer than a day since your character took part in this addiction. In addition, your character can never refresh Vigor normally: instead, he only refreshes Vigor through taking part in this addiction. This refreshment can only happen once per day, but there is a boon. Your character can take part in the addiction, however, as often you like, and one point of Vigor is returned each time. You can break this addiction. The character must abstain from the substance or behavior. At the end of each day doing so, make a Stay Up roll. If the roll is successful for five straight days, the addiction is broken. If any roll is failed, start over. The secret is kept and if the character ever takes part in the addiction again, it returns. This secret is mandatory for goblin characters.

Secret of Adaptability

Whenever Vigor is refreshed, instead of actually refreshing the pool, the player can switch his character's Adaptability score with the score for a different ability. This is a permanent switch.

Secret of Body Weaponry

Your goblin has innate weapons and armor. This Secret works like the Secret of Imbuement and may be taken multiple times in order to gain more potent or extra weapons and armor. If you have the Secret of Adaptability, these weapons and armor can be changed under the same circumstances: when Vigor is refreshed, but no pool refreshment is taken.

Secret of the Chameleon

Your character's skin can change color, and instinctively does. You always have a bonus die to hide against brown, black, grey, or dark green: basically, natural colors and rough stone.

Goblin Species Keys

Key of the Affliction

Your goblin has succumbed to the Affliction - he has learned to love. This means he is becoming human. With this Key, a goblin character may also take the human Species Key, Key of Unrequited Love. Gain 1 XP every time your character is insulted or ostracized by other goblins for the Affliction. Gain 3 XP every time this reaction causes great difficulty for your character. Buyoff: Become fully human. To do this, the character must have the Key of Unrequited Love. If your character either breaks his addiction or wins the love of his target, he becomes human. All goblin Species Secrets except Secret of the Addiction are lost, as is the Adaptability ability.

Tooth and Teat: Ratkin

Ratkin are the newest sentient species in Near, and have just started to emerge from their animal past. They are generally untrusted by all other species except goblins, and known as dirty thieves. In reality, they are loyal allies, but have a hard time adjusting to the idea of owning something.

Ratkin are most often found in dead cities, especially the crumbling walled fortresses of Maldor, and live their in enormous litters, near-feral.

Appearance and Personality

Ratkin resemble nutria, enormous rodents, standing on their hind legs with prehensile thumbs. About three to four feet tall, they have pointed button noses, whiskers, and are covered in either grey, brown, or black fur, with the occasional albino all-white ratkin. Many ratkin are not completely used to bipedal movement, and drop to all fours to run, looking like nothing but a huge rat-dog.

A wandering ratkin will bond with his companions quickly, and is usually quite uncomfortable alone. Their tendency to take the possessions of their friends is well documented, though: they have little comprehension of the idea that you can own anything, except through guarding it. In the same way, they will quarrel with their friends quicker than a human would, but quarrels are forgiven as soon as they end.

One of the Litter

The basic unit of ratkin society is the litter, being the large group the ratkin is born with. Unlike other species, not everything born to a ratkin mother is a ratkin; a typical litter is three or four ratkin and ten to twenty normal rats. At birth, the ratkin are distinguishable only by their forepaws and their size, about one-and-a-half to twice the size of the rats.

Among a litter, you own only what you can fight for: any scrap of food or shiny object quickly results in a scratching, biting ball of chaos as rat and ratkin alike pile on. This is true from birth; the first act of a ratkin's life is to claw a sibling off a teat so it can have a drink. An outsider would wonder how many make it out alive, as sibling altercations are frequent and incredibly violent. Ratkin instinctually know how to hurt their brethren without seriously damaging them, though.

Any outside threat to a member of the litter is met with real violence, though. A predator attacking a lone rat or ratkin will quickly find himself prey to a snarling, vicious wave of fur, tooth, and claw, seemingly coming from nowhere. To a ratkin, an attack on any member of his litter is even worse than a personal attack on him, and requires retribution. Although the bond is not as powerful, this is also true about the horde, the larger family a litter is born into, which can number dozens or hundreds of ratkin, and thousands of rats. For this reason, a ratkin-infested ancient city is a very dangerous place to bring hostilities.

Ratkin do leave their original litter to wander the world of Near, though. The reasons are varied. Some ratkin lose their litter to explorers; some meet outsiders and see a way of life where they do not have to fight for every meal. They do not, though, lose the concept of the litter, and usually find a group of companions to bond with, becoming their new litter.

Ratkin Species Abilities

Innate Ability: Litter Bond (Instinct)

This is the ratkin ability to move as part of a group and automatically foresee the actions of its brethren. It can be used to defend anyone in the character's litter from danger, but another Ability Check (modified by this one) is needed to actually stop the danger.

Other Uses for Abilities

Ratkin use the Scrapping ability to fight with their teeth and claws. Their thick coat and sharp natural weapons give them no disadvantage against an opponent armed with normal-size weapons. In addition, they will often charge an opponent on all fours, achieving a great speed before leaping to savagely gouge the opponent. This is done in-game with an Athletics check, with the Success Levels becoming bonus dice for a Scrapping check.

Ratkin Species Secrets

Secret of Rat Familiarity

You gain a bonus die on all Animal Ken Ability Checks involving rodents. In addition, your character can speak to rodents in their own language. Cost: nothing. This secret is mandatory for Ratkin characters.

Secret of Rat Companions

Your character always has two to four rats around him, living in his pockets, scurrying on the floor, or the like. As a whole, they have the following abilities: Athletics 2, Reaction 5, Resist 1, Stay Up 2, Scrapping 2. Prerequisite: Secret of Rat Familiarity. Cost: nothing.

Secret of Rat Size

Being a Ratkin, your character is smaller than most people in the world, and can use that to his advantage in combat. Gain a bonus die any time your character is avoiding an attack from someone larger than him or any other situation in which his reduced size may help (i.e. an Athletics Ability Check to wriggle through a pipe.) Cost: nothing.

Secret of Rat Vision

Your character is gifted with excellent night vision. Gain a bonus die on any perception-based Ability Check at night. Cost: nothing.

Secret of Sibling Rivalry

You can refresh your character's Instinct pool whenever he gets in a knock-down, drag-out fight with a member of his litter. In addition, you can immediately roll your Litter Bond ability after the fight and add those bonus dice to your litter-mate's Healing Check. Cost: nothing.

Ratkin Species Keys

Key of the Litter

Your character has a litter he was either born into or adopted. Gain 1 XP every time he defends a litter-mate from harm. Gain 3 XP every time he defends a litter-mate at great danger to himself. Buyoff: Leave your litter to strike out on your own. (Note: You may choose to adopt a different litter at any time, but must buyoff this key and buy it again for your character to bond with the new litter. Your character may not have more than one litter at a time.)

Key of the Precious

Your character jealously guards his possessions, afraid that someone will try to take them at first opportunity. Gain 1 XP every time your character gains a new possession by his skills - not when one is given to him or bought. Gain 2 XP every time your character gains a new possession by fighting for it. Gain 5 XP whenever your character successfully defends his possessions against theft. Buyoff: Give away your possessions permanently.

Zaru, the Land of Creation

Introduction

The jailers approached Hanish's cell, stinking with the sweat of fear. The older one drew out his keys, fumbling to try and get one in the lock.

"Open," Hanish said, and the lock clicked. The younger jailer's eyes drew wide as Hanish pushed the door open and walked past him.

Weird light streamed through the barred windows as Hanish climbed the stairs to Absolon's chamber. The air burned red from the Sky Fire, forming a feverish corona that filled half of the heavens. The language of creation should have never been loosed on mankind, he thought.

King Absolon pushed away his magicians and wise men, who huddled around him like children clinging for their mother's attention. "Foreigner, what would you do to stop this madness?"

As Absolon's charlatans drew back in horror, Hanish said simply, "I would break the world."

The Fingers of Divinity

Zaru is a land broken and divided. Set in a delta at the eastern mouth of the Poison River, she has been conquered by Ammeni, her people enslaved. The only resistance is outcasts, people not welcome in the Zaru communities or worship halls, for they have committed the worst sin of all, the taking of human life, and discovered a dark knowledge the elders cannot bear.

Zaru was once rich. Her soil is extremely fertile and rice, swamp apples, and other crops grow bountifully. Zaru's greatest asset became her downfall, though: the language of zu, the language of creation, spread beyond her borders and infected the world. Zu is not like other languages; it is magical, and anyone hearing it can then use it themselves. Moreover, speaking it actually wills actions, circumstances, and objects into being.

When the knowledge of zu spread, the people of the world misused it, not understanding its power. Many people believe the use of it caused the great Sky Fire, and the subsequent destruction of the old world.

The Mystery of Zu

Zu is more than a language to the Zaru; it is also a religion. The beliefs of the Zaru people can best be described as "spiritual humanism." They believe zu is the language that was used to create the world by the First Man, and that all humans are his descendants, all divine. When the first murder occurred, zu was corrupted, as murder is destruction, the antithesis of what humans were born to do.

The Zaru have always seen themselves as the caretakers of zu, keeping it pure in the face of a world fallen. Hanish, the Zaru that traveled to King Absolon and helped stop the Sky Fire, changed the nature of zu with his final chant, altering the path of the Zaru forever.

The Language of Zu

Zu is made up of discrete syllables, each with a generalized meaning. There are no specific words; instead, complex ideas are built from combinations. These syllables each have three meanings, based on tone:

- A noun, spoken with no tone
- A verb, spoken with a low tone
- A modifier (what we know as adjectives and adverbs), spoken with a high tone

The syllables, depending on tone, mean each of these things; thus, no syllable exists in zu that cannot be used as a noun, verb, and modifier. Pronouns are implied by context and body language. Sentences, as modern-day speakers think of them, exist by combining these syllables. The last syllable used in a sentence conveys the sentence type. A sentence ending in a noun is a statement of fact, meaning “this exists” or “this is so.” A sentence ending in a verb is a command, even if it refers to the speaker: the speaker is stating his action and in essence, commanding himself. A sentence ending in a modifier is different than any modern sentence. It expresses hope or desire for change, meaning “I wish that it was like this.”

As mentioned, syllables are general terms, not specific. There is no one syllable for “tiger,” for example. “Tiger” would be spoken as “knife-tooth-hunter-beast.” Another example would be “sword,” which is said as “killing-knife.” When designing a syllable to use in the game, try breaking down English words into their most atomic parts. If a zu speaker does not use multiple syllables to be specific, then the most appropriate meaning is assumed. For example, if a speaker says “beast” in a forest, he means “forest animal”; if he were to say the same syllable in a snake pit, he means snake. If he were to say “knife” to a farmer and a hunter, he would again mean different things - most likely a scythe and a hunting knife.

Also as mentioned, each syllable has three forms.

Noun	Verb	Modifier
knife	cut	sharp
tooth	eat	full
murder	kill	murderous
hunter	hunt/stalk	stealthy

There is one syllable in zu that is not like any other: “zu.” “Zu” is an affirmation, an agreement. Originally, there was no opposite, no “no” in zu. (True Zaru never speak in the negative: if there is nothing affirmative to say, they do not speak in zu.) With the first act of murder, however, that changed. The murderer, the destroyer, lost his ability to speak the syllable “zu.” Instead, he spoke the syllable “uz,” a word of disagreement and destruction. No man can say both “zu” and “uz.”

The Power of Zu

Originally, anyone who spoke zu could use it as words of power. Stating that something was so made it so; commanding someone made compelled them; wishing for different circumstances brought them into being. With Hanish’s final chant, this changed. He brought all the power of zu into himself, re-creating himself as the First Man. Suddenly, the Zaru lost their power, as their language became ordinary and impotent.

Hanish died that day, but the power of zu did not die with him. Instead, it changed forever. The power of a syllable could be harnessed, but only by one person at a time. Anyone who studies zu can speak it, but only those who are the master of a syllable can use it to enforce their will. Now, Zaru priests, outcasts, and foreigners vie to obtain the knowledge of these words.

In the game, words of power are used like this:

Nouns will things into being. These things, if animate, are not under the speaker's control. The speaker's player must spend a point of Reason and make an unopposed Ability Check using his character's Zu ability. (If the thing summoned is unnatural for the surroundings, a penalty die should be imposed.) If anyone else is present, they can resist, using their Resist ability. The thing will appear near the speaker, and any information about the thing not spoken as a word of power will be determined by the Story Guide.

Dan's character Damuzi says the syllables "stealthy-beast". A stealthy creature will appear, but whether it is a cat, wolf, or whatever else is up to the Story Guide.

Verbs are commands, and impose the will of the speaker on another. The speaker's player must spend a point of Instinct and make an opposed Ability Check using his character's Zu ability versus the opponent's Resist ability, with Instinct as the associated pool. Only animate beings can be affected, and a being cannot be compelled to do an impossible task.

Damuzi later says "burn" to an enemy, but the enemy has no way to burn himself, and so ignores it. If Damuzi first started a fire, then his command could take affect.

The target being must be able to hear the speaker.

Modifiers change circumstances or actions. Unlike commands, modifiers can be used against animate and inanimate objects that the speaker can see. Whatever the object is, it must be performing an action, even if it is as simple as the wind blowing. The speaker spend a point of Vigor and must make an Ability Check using his character's Zu ability. If the target is animate and the target can hear the speaker, the Ability Check can be opposed by the target's Resist ability. Difficulty does apply to this Ability Check; the Story Guide can feel free to impose penalty dice for modifying large forces of nature and the like.

The Success Level of the Ability Check is used to impose bonus or penalty dice, depending on how the modifier affects the action. If a messenger is running, and the speaker says "fast," then the runner gets bonus dice to run. If an enemy is holding onto a cliff edge, and the speaker says "fast" to the wind, then the wind will blow faster, and the enemy will receive penalty dice to hang on.

The Theft of Zu

The danger of using zu around other people is that they may steal the knowledge of a syllable. When a zu is spoken, anyone who hears it can engage the speaker in a battle of wills to own the knowledge of that word.

In game mechanics, anyone who hears the syllable, has an advance to spend, and has either the Secret of Zu or the Secret of Uz can steal the syllable. If the thief does not have either Secret, his player can immediately spend an advance to take it. In order to steal a syllable, an opposed Ability Check of the thief's Zu ability is made against the speaker's Zu ability. If the Ability Check is successful, the thief spends an advance and takes the syllable. The speaker loses the syllable, but gains an advance.

A willing gift of a syllable does not require an Ability Check, but does require the expenditure of advances. The spending of advances to take zu is like buying a Secret for your character, but is not subject to the normal rules about the order of advances that can be taken.

Mighty and Powerless: The People of Zaru

When the Zaru lost their language, they lost the ability to defend themselves. By nature, the Zaru are pacifists, finding no need for violence with their terrible gifts. As they emerged back into the world, they found themselves overpowered by the Ammenites, who had long before envied the fertility of the Zaru delta. Zaru's people were taken as slaves and made to work in the worst sort of hot, steamy, swampy conditions.

As the world regrows, though, Zaru has found itself in an even worse position: not only are her people enslaved, but they are divided. Can the power of zu save them - or will it destroy them?

Life of the Speaking-People

As a people, the Zaru are fairly uniform in appearance. Black hair is virtually homogenous among them, and their skin is dusky, their eyes dark. If they look like a modern-day people of Earth, those people would come straight out of Southeast Asia, complete with loose-fitting clothes and large, flat hats made to keep the burning sun off them when toiling in the fields.

As a nation, Zaru does not exist any longer. Ammeni truly has dominated it, and Zaru villages exist on Ammenite plantations, under the care of foremen. Typical construction is made of bamboo, and communities exist around "speaking halls," long buildings in which the Zaru eat, cook, converse, and often sleep. Only the elders of a community and their adult children have the privilege of living in tiny huts built around the speaking hall. Older villages, pre-Shadow, do exist in Zaru, which are basically larger versions of their slave villages: large speaking halls with family houses built around the central building. These are usually constructed of hard, baked clay around a bamboo center, and are incredibly durable. As insurgency has grown in Zaru, some radical groups have fled to the old towns and formed their bases of operations there.

Families are very important in traditional Zaru culture. They are viewed as "mini-villages," with the eldest person being the leader of that family. (Pre-Shadow Zaru houses bear this out, as they are usually built as a long room spanning the house, with rooms built off of this.) Villages are built around the same structure, with the eldest person in village taking the role of priest and leader, as they have seen more and heard more than anyone else. The Ammenites are well aware of this, and break up families and villages by sending children inland and working the elderly to an early death. One underground movement in Zaru returns babies to their mothers in the dark night, traveling far over land to switch them back.

Land-Thieves, Word-Thieves, and Blood-Thieves

The zu phrase for an Ammenite is "land-thief," an appropriate epithet for a people who have turned Zaru into their personal playground. Even more sinister are the terms "word-thief" and "blood-thief."

"Word-thief" is a term given to a non-Zaru that uses the sacred tongue of zu, especially Ammenite sorcerers. Zaru elders are torn on how to deal with the resurgence of zu and its potent virulence. The majority of them, who remember a time when zu was taken away, agree that it should not be used, thereby keeping it firmly - but uselessly - in Zaru hands. The younger generation doesn't completely agree: there is a strong underground movement to rebel against the Ammenites using any means necessary.

There are several priestly organizations loosing forming in Zaru, all centered around proper zu usage and Zaru unity. One group believes that all zu should be kept firmly in the hands of Zaru, specifically elders, thereby keeping the unwise from using it, and denying their enemies a potent weapon. This group, the Watchers, train young rebels to work as "word-horses," adventurers who steal zu from non-Zaru, or Zaru using it unwisely, and bring those zu back to their priests. This group is committed to the Zaru way of non-violence, but some fringe priesthoods have seen fit to use foreign mercenaries to carry words.

The Sons of Hanish follow a more moderate path. They seek to follow in the path of Hanish and be an active force in the world, while staying true to their beliefs. This group operates in cells, which are based on the family “mini-village” structure, and attempts to change the situation of the Zaru by subtle actions, like using zu to influence a foreman to keep a family together, or causing a crop to do poorly. They have designed a martial arts form, Uptenbo or “life-shield-hand,” which is non-lethal but powerful, concentrating on redirection of force and incapacitation.

The Moonmen are the most radical of the Zaru priesthoods, and are the most diverse. While the Sons of Hanish are mainly young and male, and the Watchers older, the Moonmen are made up of brash youngsters, lunatic elderly, calm mothers, and even foreigners. They advocate nothing more than a full unleashing of Zaru power. Non-violence is taken only on a personal basis among them, and they have no real structure. Instead, individual Moonmen tend to upset the cart, often putting the community in a worse situation, and spread their beliefs among those pressured enough to listen. It is said that the Moonmen count among their ranks at least one elf and several goblins. More conservative Zaru call these “blood-thieves,” both for their subversion of the normal Zaru structure, and for their willingness to kill.

Other Species in Zaru

The Zaru are a small, insular people whose sense of identity is culture- and language-based much more so than it is region-based. Other species are not readily accepted, although that doesn't mean that the Zaru are a bunch of speciest bastards. They've just got such a crummy lot in life that they don't have a lot of time for others.

Goblins are a common sight among the Ammenites, who keep them as pets, so they draw wariness. Elves, who are much less common in general, are better respected, although their philosophical beliefs clash with the Zaru.

Strangest of all is the Zaru relationship with ratkin. The swamp's a fertile breeding ground for ratkin, and many live in the ruins of old Zaru. They have become neighbors of a sort, and it's not unheard of at all for ratkin to perform tasks the Zaru can't in their struggle against Ammeni.

Zaru Cultural Abilities

Artistic Abilities

Poetry (Instinct)

This ability is used for composing verse. Zaru poetry is most often long and non-rhyming, with strict syllabic patterns for each stanza.

Clay-moulding (Vigor)

With this ability, your character can build tablets, pots, buildings, tables, or anything else appropriate out of the rich clay of Zaru.

Craft Abilities

Farming (Reason)

Farming is used for the cultivation of plants. This does not include herding and management of animals, which is unknown in Zaru culture.

Fighting Abilities

Uptenbo (Vigor)

Uptenbo is the underground Zaru martial art. Because of the traditional nonviolence of the Zaru, Uptenbo is purely a defensive art, and can be used to drive off, humiliate, or subdue an enemy, not to kill. It consists of strong arm grabs, throws, and sweeps, using the enemy's attacks against him.

Illicit Abilities

Clandestinity (Reason)

Clandestinity is the art of quiet secrecy, and more specifically, creating, communicating with, and maintaining secret networks. It is used to create ciphers and codes, as well as decrypt them, organize secret meetings while keeping them secret, and for all other sorts of long-term sub-rosa activity.

Outdoor Abilities

Boating (Instinct)

This ability is used to craft and use small boats that could carry one to ten men. These craft are used mainly on inland waters, and are difficult, but not impossible, to use as sea vehicles.

Social Abilities

Serve (Instinct)

To serve is to anticipate your master's needs, to broach uncomfortable subjects while remaining servile, and to be invisible until wanted. This ability allows for performance of all the roles of a servant.

Priestly Abilities

Zu (Reason)

Zu is the magical language of the Zaru. This ability represents your character's knowledge of the language and force of using it.

Endure Torture (Vigor)

This ability is generally used only defensively, although it could be used to add to a Healing Check after being tortured. It is the ability to take large amount of cruel pain and ignore it.

Zaru Cultural Secrets

Secret of Swamp Lore

Your character always has a bonus die on Woodcraft or other Ability Checks involving swamp flora and fauna, and can use his Woodcraft skill for navigation in the swamp. He also receives a bonus die to Farming checks in the swamp.

Secret of Kinetic Redirection

When your character is using Uptenbo to defend himself, you can take successes from your defense and add them as bonus dice to your next Uptenbo attack, using the full motion of the attacker to power your move. Cost: 1 Instinct.

Secret of Constant Motion

Your character's body is so well-trained that he can use Uptenbo almost without thought. If attacked, your character can use Uptenbo in Bringing Down the Pain for any action without changing from his true intention.

Secret of Zu

This Secret allows your character to speak the words of zu in their full power, although the character does not actually know any words of power besides “zu,” which simply means “yes” or agreement. Speaking “zu,” and spending a point of Reason, allows you to add a bonus die to an action of anyone within sight. Prerequisite: The character cannot have taken a human life, ever. If the character takes human life, this Secret is immediately lost and the [Secret of Uz] is gained. In addition, the player can only take this Secret when the character is hearing someone use zu as words of power.

Secret of Uz

This Secret allows your character to speak the words of zu in their full power, although the character does not actually know any words of power besides “uz,” which simply means “no” or disagreement. Speaking “uz,” and spending a point of Instinct, allows you to add a penalty die to an action of anyone within sight. Prerequisite: The character must have taken a human life. In addition, the player can only take this Secret when the character is hearing someone use zu as words of power.

Zaru Cultural Keys

Key of the Collector

Your character is dedicated to obtaining as many zu as possible. Gain 1 XP whenever he obtains information about the location of a zu word. Gain 3 XP whenever he puts himself at risk in order to obtain a zu. Buyoff: Willingly give away a zu.

Key of the Pacifist

Your character has a personal commitment to nonviolence. Gain 1 XP for every adventure in which your character does not commit any violence. Gain 2 XP every time your character does not commit violence even though it causes him minor harm or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time your character does not commit violence even though it causes him great harm. Buyoff: Purposefully harm another sentient creature.

Ammeni, The Flower of Hell

Introduction

Phillipe, lord of the manor, stood with a grin. “Lord Fleur shows me much respect with this spread before me,” he said to the servant girl draped in silk gauze over a low-slung chaise. “These fruits and dried meats are spectacular. Nomi, do sample them.”

The Zaru slave nodded, his mutilated tongue ruined for speech but trained in the art of poison-finding. After tasting the many presents given to Phillipe, and washing them down with a sip of wine from Before the Shadow, he glanced at the succulent gift upon the chaise with a question in his eyes.

“Ah, Nomi. This delight is my own to sample,” Phillipe grinned. He placed a wedge of starfruit on his lips and swallowed it down in one overtly sexual motion. Drawing close to the girl, he began to unwrap his present. “Let us see what is ripe in this garden.” He nestled his face in her bosom, then trailed downwards, drawing the fragrant juices like fresh honeysuckle.

As Phillipe’s eyes rolled back, the girl kicked him backwards onto the floor, his swollen tongue lewdly protruding from his lips. “You were correct, Nomi. This one is too trusting,” she said, reaching between her legs to pull out a delicate, but deadly, blossom, and tossing it upon Phillipe’s unmoving breast.

Houses of Treachery

Ammeni is a land of beauty and death, exotic foods and terrible poisons, incredible wealth and decimating poverty. It is geographically positioned to be a focal point for trade in northern Near, with its north coast bordering the Sea of Teeth and its eastern shore a wide delta against the ocean. The western and southern borders end at the intersection of the Belhor River and Absolon’s Way, although it controls only the eastern portion of that land well, with the west fallen into barbarism and savagery. The primary seats of power run near the River of Vipers, which cuts down from the Sea of Teeth to the Zaru Delta, which Ammeni has captured for its own.

Ammeni, being incredibly hot and wet, is extremely fertile. The majority of the Houses’ business is growing rice and fruits and farming fish and water buffalo. These staples, plus the chiles grown further in the west, provide them with an endless source of trade. Their navy is powerful and is used for shipping, not only for Ammeni, but to allied merchants in Maldor, where it makes a tidy profit on the deal. Ammeni is also home to Near’s most wondrous drugs and deadliest poisons. A career in death is definitely a lucrative one here. The items Ammeni is most deficient in, yet craves, are metals and jewels. Most of their trade is for these two goods.

Power in Ammeni comes from the seven Houses, plantations which have grown into both tremendous mercantile houses and governmental entities. The “House” refers not only to the ruler of the House, or the business, but also the land that House controls. Within a House, laws are determined by the ruler of that House or his staff, and are usually capriciously enforced. Trade law is created by majority vote among the rulers of the seven Houses, the Council, which are normally embroiled in the covert sabotage and annexation of each other, forming alliances that last only weeks before backstabbing allies. These Houses are seven heads of the same hydra; before the year of Shadow, the seven Houses were seven sons of the same ancient father, who ruled the waterways and fields of Ammeni. Those sons’ descendants emerged after the Shadow to divide Ammeni, and quarrel with each other only slightly less than they subjugate the peasantry.

The one cause that has recently joined the Houses is a war on the Ammeni-Khale border. Rumors of a strange substance called “moon-metal” have emerged from Khale, and the Ammenite Houses have thrown their normal caution regarding Khale to the wind in order to control this material, rumored to have power-

ful properties. This has worked out poorly for both sides of the conflict: the Khaleans strike in small groups and have eradicated every excursion into their land by Ammeni military, although with high losses.

Sleeping Among the Snakes

Ammenites are known outside their country for their cruelty and decadence. The appearance is misleading, however: only the richest of Ammenites have the opportunity for cruelty and the ability for decadence. The rest of them are merely opportunists, making the best deals they can in a colonial society. The upper class of Ammenites, however - and there is little lower class in the east as the Zaru toil - are decadent to an extreme, clothing themselves in the finest silk and eating bizarre delicacies grown only in the fertile delta soil. Ammenites are the descendants of Maldor, although they do not like to be reminded of this fact. Their language is much like the language of Maldor, but is filled with pops and flecks in between words to convey connotation.

A full five percent of the population of Ammeni belongs to the hyper-wealthy House families, although many of these are not related by blood. The habitual assassination of family members meant that ambitious types may rise quickly. Slavery is common in Ammeni, and at least twenty-five percent of the population is made of slaves, many of them from the former nation of Zaru. The incidence of death among slaves is almost as high as that among House family members: slaves are treated with the utmost brutality by the desensitized and dazed rulers. The rest of the population are either what we would know as middle management - low-level employees assigned to control slaves and supervise menial labor - or poor freemen, who try to attract as little attention as possible, and often leave Ammeni to become wanderers or traders.

Hordes in the Mouth, Fires in the Belly

The Ammenites collect art of other cultures more than they create their own: the acquisition of art is a hobby for the upper classes. Native Ammenite art is bizarre, focusing on themes of oppression and the inevitability of death. The most famous Ammenite painting is of a rice patty, red with blood, with tall stalks rising to the sky; the most famous book is the story of the last 24 hours of a rich, mad man. Zaru slaves do create art as well, although mostly ritual chants made of gibberish that manage to convey emotion. Their funeral dirges are known to bring even the strongest Ammenites to tears, which brings horrible wrath upon them.

The food of Ammeni, however, is considered a delicacy. Hot and spicy, full of cream, rice, and noodles, as well as odd ingredients such as slugs, uncooked quail eggs, and fish-eyes, it evokes either love or disgust in most people. They make a rice wine that is similar: either astounding or repulsive, depending on the taster, and take large amounts of poiture, the pollen of a gleaming white flower that grows wild in the rice fields of Ammeni. Poiture puts people into a deep relaxed state much like slumber where the sense of time becomes elongated.

The Ammenites eschew religion, worshipping only gold and riches. The Council of Houses has outlawed religious ceremonies in the land, although both the Zaru slaves and members of the Houses often participate in odd cults, especially the Revenant Cult. This cult maintains that the ancient House Father still lives, driven on by a poisonous cocktail, and its members reach for immortality by experimentation, attempting to recreate the Father's mystic brew.

The Roots in the Mists

From the fertile ground of Ammeni grows the world's largest supply of drugs of all types. Recreational drugs, poisons, and great healing herbs all sprout up wildly throughout Ammeni. The most common of these is a flower called poiture. White poiture is a powerful recreational drug, sending the user in a hazy dream-state where consciousness becomes very third-person and the sense of time grows elongated. Red poiture, a much rarer type, causes fevered activity, occasional rage, and a loss of concentration. Black poiture is known to

give a much more potent high than white poiture, and has reputed healing powers, but causes death in small quantities.

Between the cornucopia of herbs and significant studies of the inner workings of the body done by curious or disturbed Ammenites, healers are common here. Many healers find employment in Houses as personal doctors or torturers, and others become medics in the legions. Unaffiliated healers are harder to come by, and most leave Ammeni to wander, although a few stay behind to help the Zaru underground.

Unaffiliated poisoners, on the other hand, are a dime a dozen. They might change affiliation once a week. For this reason, the hardest job interview in Ammeni is for a chef position. Chefs are known to be the best poisoners, and getting a job in a House as one means being interviewed by the ruler of that House, as well as his staff, and perhaps his torturer.

Other Species in Ammeni

Ammenites are not altogether comfortable with anything besides humans in their midst; those of the Houses are not truly comfortable with humans that don't have wealth, even. Still, some elves find their way into acceptance, given that they have a black enough heart.

Goblins, given their nature, are generally thought of as pets, and find themselves hooked on Ammeni's exotic foods and drugs. Many of them find themselves employed as taskmasters, thugs, or playthings.

Ratkin are not uncommon in the swampier parts of the land, but are either hunted or pressed into labor. Their assistance to the people of Zaru brings special torture upon them when caught.

The Taste of Death

Poisons and drugs can have the following mechanical effects:

- One penalty or bonus die to all abilities related to one pool. This can be chosen multiple times to affect one pool more than once or different pools. It is not uncommon for a drug to affect different pools in different ways: the crimson blossoms of blood poiture increase Vigor-based abilities while eroding Reason-based ones.
- Damage. All poisons and drugs do temporary damage to the character taking them, but this provides a real, physical damage. This can also be taken multiple times to increase damage by two points each time.
- Unconsciousness. Drugs and poisons often knock their recipients into a dazed or unconscious state.
- Loss or heightening of a sense. This is really a specialized version of penalty and bonus dice above. In this case, the bonus or penalty dice are increased by two, and all abilities that rely on that sense are affected. However, with this effect, the dice can be reversed by overstimulation. A drug which enhances touch to the point one can read print with his fingertips can result in that character having a major penalty the first time he gets hit.

There is not a definitive list of poisons and drugs in The Shadow of Yesterday. Instead, all can be made from the above list of effects.

To find the materials for drugs or poisons, a successful Herb Lore check needs to be made. The found material can be used as a poison or drug, but it can only have one beneficial effect from the above list. It must have one deleterious effect. In addition, the poison can only be taken orally. To increase its potency, and allow it to be used via other methods, the poison must be distilled. Using the Distill Herbs ability, with

bonus dice from the Herb Lore check, extra effects can be added. The first extra effect is free, and others can be gained using Ammenite Secrets. When a poison is distilled, it is made into an infusion, the essence of the poison suspended in liquid, usually grain alcohol. The infusion must be taken orally, injected, or otherwise gotten into the target's bloodstream in order to take effect.

When a poison is administered to someone, they must make a resisted Stay Up check. They are resisting an already rolled check - either the Herb Lore check in the case that it is an undistilled poison, or the Distill Herbs check in the case of a distilled poison. (When making these checks, the player should record the result as the poison's potency.)

In the case of an undistilled poison, the character comes to no harm if the Stay Up check is successful, and receives any beneficial effect the poison has. If unsuccessful, all the poison's effects take place, and the character takes damage equal to the poison's potency Success Level. The poison's effects last until the damage wears off. In the case of a distilled poison, the character receives the undistilled effects if the Stay Up check is successful, but takes no damage. The effect wears off in the next scene. If unsuccessful, the poison's full effect takes place, with damage, and does not wear off until that damage is gone.

Ammenite Cultural Abilities

Artistic Abilities

Appraisal (Reason)

Appraisal not only grants the ability to determine what an object of art is worth, but what it is worth to a specific person. It can be used to determine where and when a piece of art originated, and the value of the piece.

Craft Abilities

Bladework (Instinct)

This ability is used for all sorts of intricate knife skills, from cutting paper-thin slices of meat and vegetables, to vivisection, to cutting down your enemy with a long dagger. It can be used to perform skilled work with any well-made sharp knife.

Anatomy (Reason)

The Ammenite knowledge of the workings of the human body is the deepest in Near. This ability can be used for all sorts of purposes, including performing major surgery on those grievously injured (helping with a Healing Check), performing cruel acts of torture while keeping a subject alive, or bizarre piercing and grafting acts.

Distill Herbs (Reason)

This ability is used to draw out the essence of plants and strength them, either for good or ill.

Taste Poisons (Instinct)

This ability is used to detect poisons and drugs through taste and smell. Successful Ability Checks may be used to add bonus dice to the inevitable Stay Up check that will be needed to ward off the effects of tasting poison.

Fighting Abilities

Bamboo Warrior (Vigor)

The weaponry and armor of Ammeni are generally made of bamboo, a flexible and common material in this metal-poor land. This ability is used not only to fight with the light pole-arms of Ammeni, but to create weapons and armor from bamboo.

Illicit Abilities

Assassination (Instinct)

The art of quick and often mysterious death is the domain of this ability. It can only be used to kill an individual who is unaware that your character is trying to do so. It should be used for all inventive method of death, such as spraying an infusion into the mucus membranes of a target.

Smuggling (Reason)

Smuggling not only involves the skill of hiding illegal or restricted items in ordinary baggage, but also knowing how to find a buyer for the items in a foreign land.

Outdoor Abilities

Herb Lore (Reason)

This ability is used to identify poisonous and altering plants, as well as properly harvest them for use.

Ammenite Cultural Secrets

Secret of Healing Venom

Your character can distill poisons that have an unusual effect: they shock the body into healing. These poisons still damage the imbiber if his Stay Up check is unsuccessful. If successful, however, the character is healed of damage equal to the poison's potency Success Level. Cost: 2 Reason.

Secret of Metastasis

Your character can increase and add to poisons' effects with great skill. As many effects as you like can be added to drugs and poisons that he distills. Cost: 2 Reason for each extra effect past the first.

Secret of the Serpent Blade

By boiling an infusion down to a sticky substance, it can be applied to any sharp surface, usable indefinitely, until the object actually pierces someone. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Secret of the Fire Fruit

Your character's skill with chiles and other fiery ingredients is so good that he can actually damage others with a successful attempt at cooking. The Ability Check is your cooking ability versus the eater's Stay Up ability, modified by Vigor. Cost: nothing.

Secret of the Iron Stomach

Your character has great ability to consume things that would otherwise harm him. Gain one bonus die to resist any poison or drug taken orally, or to resist the effects of spoiled, overly spiced, or otherwise harmful foods. Cost: nothing.

Ammenite Cultural Keys

Key of the House

Your character is a member of and dedicated to a House, one of the mercantile entities of Ammeni. Being a member of a House has great economic advantages, but requires much of a person. Gain 1 XP every time your character does something to benefit his House. Gain 2 XP every time he does something to benefit his house that causes him discomfort or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP every time he acts to benefit his House at the great risk of his body, reputation, or wealth. Buyoff: Act against the interests of one's House.

Key of the Overlord

Your character owns other people or oversees the ownership of others. Gain 1 XP every time your character makes someone else do something against his will. Gain 3 XP every time your character makes someone else do something that causes harm, pain, or despair to that person. Buyoff: Free a person under your ownership or oversight.

Sample Ammenite Names

Males: Kaarlo, Philippe, Amoux, Onfroi, Cador, Edmund, Owain, Montaigu, D'anton, Toussint, Duval, Quennel, Dacian, Piperel, Piperel

Females: Helene, Galatee, Shalott, Celie, Arleta, Eugenia, Sidonie, Rohais, Ruby, Eleta, Ysabel, Zuria, Marquisa, Damia, Aveline

Sample Ammenite Character Ideas

- a son or daughter in a high-ranking House
- a poisoner in love with a slave
- a Ratkin "Robin Hood," stealing from the Houses and helping the Zaru
- a spy in the employ of one House - or even a double-agent

Khale, the Roots of the World

Introduction

Only a few tribes-people were left, their warriors decimated in a lightning strike by the vipers of Ammeni. Nevins and Violet, brother and sister, carried the mortally-wounded chief in a make-shift bundle.

“Nevins, take my spear,” the chieftain moaned. “You must lead the tribe now.”

Nevins shifted uncomfortably, his lute banging against his elbow. “Father, I am forsworn not to fight, but to tell the stories of battle.”

“Tighten your wrists,” growled the dying chief. “Be a man of Khale. It is your duty and destiny to protect the tribe’s women.”

Violet sighed. “Give me the spear already, Father. My arm is as strong as any man’s, and deadlier.”

“Woman, daughter - you cannot wield the sacred spear of our tribe. The wood would creak and break under your grasp. Be not jealous of your brother. It is your duty to raise the remnants of our tribe.”

“I cannot wield ...” Violet started, astonished at her father’s lack of wisdom. Her eyes grew tight in anger, and then tighter in concentration. Catlike, she grabbed the spear and tossed it into the brush.

“Fool woman! Your petty jealousy will cost us our heritage.”

Violet stormed away, reaching into the undergrowth. She pulled out a bloody spear and the black-clad head of an Ammenite assassin, severed with one blow. “I cannot wield the tribal spear, you said?”

A Forest Aflame

Across the Border Sea, the deep green peninsula of Khale is an echo of Qek’s lushness. Once a stone’s throw across the Hungry River from Qek, the earthquakes of the Time of Shadow have split it away as the river was ripped into the much larger Sea of Teeth. It is still close: the Dragon’s Mouth is a small strait between Khale and Qek, and is usually much calmer than the sea. Controlling this strait, as well as a mysterious substance called moon-metal, earns Khale the enmity of its southern neighbor, Ammeni, who has attacked the country in a war of attrition for several years.

The forests of Khale are wet and thick, but move from jungle to evergreen woodlands, dappled with sunlight. They are sacred to the people of Khale who live beneath their towering bows. Everything a tribesman could need is found under the forest-top, from fields of mushrooms and plants for medicine and food, to deer to hunt and ride, to fallen tree limbs easily sap-cured into bows and spears. Before the Time of Shadow, great webbed cities connected the forest; since then, the remnants of tribes live only off the land.

Khale is a harsh land in which to live: its many rivers flow with the blood of cousins, as the many tribes fight for control of their own land, and Ammeni pushes its troops further north. The land rumbles as many chieftains try to unite the tribes, but so far, none have been successful.

The People of Khale

The Tribe is Family

Khaleans (ka-le-ans) are a hearty and strong people, Caucasian in appearance, with generally black, brown, or red hair, and green or brown eyes. They claim ancient heritage with the people of Qek, although they speak different languages, and maintain good relations with the few Qek that emerge from the jungle.

Khaleans operate in tribes of two to four dozen people and consider all tribe members to be their family, not just blood relations. In fact, blood brothers from different tribes are not considered to be related at all, except in the way that all Khaleans are related. Upon marriage, males join the tribe of their wife, becoming part of a new family. In addition, outsiders, or those with no family, can become part of the tribe through a naming ritual.

Within the tribe, status is very important. While family lines are matriarchal, positions of power are dominated by men. The tribe's chief is almost always male, the husband of the eldest woman in the tribe, and his advisors, usually a bard and his most accomplished warrior, are also men. When two tribes battle, it is Khalean law - that is, tradition as old as Khale - that only the tribe's men can fight. If a woman were found to be fighting for a tribe, it would be a horrible disgrace, and that tribe would more than likely surrender the fight.

Cousins at War

Each tribe governs itself in Khale, making its own laws and staking its own territory. The Year of Shadow scattered the old tribes, and since then, many of the new tribes have made war on each other over parcels of land, each claiming ancestral rights.

Ammeni, however, has declared war on Khale in the past few years. Several tribal leaders have attempted to unite the tribes in order to strike out at the foreign warriors, who are systematically destroying the forests on Khale's southern border. No true leader has emerged thus far, and Khale grows smaller and more fragile each year. One unexpected side-effect of the war with Ammeni is that some women have taken up arms, causing tension within tribes.

We Are the Forest

The forests of Khale are worshiped as ancestors. Each tree in a tribe's territory is believed to be a fallen member of the tribe, born again as part of the land. (This further inflames battles between tribes over land, as each tribe believes the trees there to be their ancestors.) An ancient and legendary tree in the center of Khale is said to be the great King Khale, a ruler that united all of the peninsula and lands beyond, and the father of all modern Khaleans.

Khale has one of the most vibrant artistic cultures in Near, most probably because of their belief that creating art is a form of worship. While their painting and sculpture are beautiful, their real excellence is with their music and stories, which are intertwined. Their stories and songs are usually about the tales of ancestral heroes, although they are usually embellished or even completely made up, depending on who you ask. (Khaleans insists that all their stories are true, although one of their favorite proverbs is "a story should be told the way things should have happened.") Often, an entire tribe will dress up and act out a play depicting a story of ancient Khale, even getting other friendly tribes to participate.

Religion revolves around festivals, gatherings where a tribe - or many friendly tribes - will gather for a many-day-long revelry and celebration of their past. All festivals have telling of great tales done by their ancestors, done ritually around a bonfire. These rituals are competitive as tribal priests or bards try to outdo each other with fantastic stories. The bards, part priest and part artist, are given a special place in Khalean culture, as

they are immune to normal tribal conflicts. When two tribes clash, the bards of each tribe will meet to write down the story of the conflict, narrating it as the battle flows. Killing a bard is a criminal offense, and usually results in the death of the murderer.

Magic is fully accepted in Khale, and fascinates most people. The bards of Khale, and foreign sorcerers (called druids by the Khaleans) are highly respected and use magic freely. It is said that each bard learns three Perfect Chords in his lifetime: one to bring tears of sorrow; one to change tears of sorrow to tears of joy; and the last to put listeners to sleep.

The Green World

Inside the forests of Khale, there is another world, a mystic world. This is their greatest secret, and it is forbidden to share it with those not of the tribe. Ancient trees, those with a circumference greater than three men holding hands, can be used as a gateway into the Green World. This Green World is a maze of pathways, some so small that one must crawl through them, and others large enough for five people to stand side-by-side. The walls of these caverns are growing wood, light and grainy, and glow with faint green light. When the Sky Fire came, many Khaleans moved into the Green World to escape, building cities inside its immense caverns. Those cities lie dead now, and are said to be haunted; gnarled trees grow throughout them, with human expressions twisted into their trunks.

The Green World covers all of Khale, and can be used as a passageway to anywhere else in the land, provided there is a guide. When one ends up is less certain: while experienced travelers have little trouble, those who get lost in the Green World may find themselves exiting into another time entirely. Bards sometime use these passages to go to earlier times and talk to ancient ancestors, although no one has ever been able to travel within one hundred years before the Time of Shadow, or one year after it.

Legends say that King Khale himself still wanders these halls, a large old man with a beard like moss, and hands like wood-knots. Supposedly, he or other great ancestors can guide you to any place and time within these halls, or grant you great boons, provided you perform a quest, usually a re-enactment of a previous adventure of the ancestor. During festivals, tribes will sometimes send their greatest bards and warriors to perform a quest and grant them success over their enemies.

As war envelops Khale from the south, some tribes have moved completely into the Green World, leaving the land of Khale behind. Their great mistake lies in the fact that the Green World does not stand alone: it is formed of the forest of Khale, and as the forest falls, it grows dimmer and smaller.

The Hands of the Tribe

Within tribes, farming and hunting are both respectable jobs and craftsmen and artists are well respected. The ability of Khalean craftsmen to forge sharp swords and carve strong tools and weapons from wood, curing them with sap, is legendary.

Khale trades for metal tools with Qek, and their longships sail to Jalna and Goren to trade spices which do not grow in those countries' colder environments. Many young Khalean men, bereft of family, have joined crews, even becoming pirates. The Wooden Sickel is a famous ship of pirate youth that has been the scourge of the Ammeni coastline.

Marijuana effects

Undistilled

- One penalty die to Reason-based abilities
- Heightened tactile effects (one bonus die to some uses of Savoir-Faire, one penalty die to all Resist checks against Seduction or resisting physical torture)

(See the section on Ammeni for more information on game mechanics for drugs.)

Khaleans have a taste for drink, and import beer from Maldor and Goren and wine from Oran in large quantities. They also are known to grow marijuana, a plant which is smoked for mild hallucinatory and relaxative effects. This drug is said to bring out epic tales in heroes and increase sexual desire.

Moon-metal

After the Year of Shadow, a group of explorers found a forest like no other in northern Khale; metal grew up from the ground, gleaming like bright silver, sprouting branches like trees. This, the only metal in Khale, is said to be a piece of the Shadow Moon fell to earth. Whatever it is, it has taken root and grows in a parody of a natural forest.

Moon-metal is easy to craft, and deadly sharp and strong. If heated over a fire, it responds to the user's wants to form itself into any metal object, which is of superior quality (an automatic +1 weapon or armor.) However, it severs the user's relationship with the Green World. If moon-metal so much as touches you, you receive one penalty die with the ability Tree-Bond. Each day that you are in contact with moon-metal, the penalty dice grow, to a maximum of five. It takes an expenditure of five Vigor and five Instinct points to remove one penalty die. (These points need not be spent all at once if a character does not have that many.) One cannot enter the Green World with any moon-metal upon their person.

Other Species in Khale

Like their claimed brethren, the Qek, Khaleans have little problem with other species. Goblins form tribes throughout Khale, and are called spriggans by the locals, who find them more amusing than annoying. Elves are viewed with some pity and suspicion: they are believed to be the seeds of fallen ancestors who did not take root and now wander. The Ratkin are not numerous in Khale, preferring the cities, but there is the rumor of one Khalean tribe composed completely of Ratkin.

Khale Cultural Abilities

Craft Abilities

Lunar Forging (Reason)

This ability is used to craft moon-metal by projecting one's psychic force upon it. A successful Ability Check is needed to craft an item. When struck by wood, moon-metal has a tendency to lose its form: this skill is also used to force the metal to keep its shape (a resisted Ability Check versus the attack).

Fighting Abilities

Guerilla Warfare (Instinct)

Unlike Battle, which is standard military tactics knowledge, Guerilla Warfare is your character's knowledge of alternative tactics which give a smaller force a much greater advantage. It is used for coordinating quick and nasty attacks while hiding in the forest; using noise and trickery to appear to be a larger force, and eliminating your enemies one by one through ambushes.

Spear-fighting (Vigor)

The most popular weapon in Khale is a long spear, formed completely from sap-hardened wood. This weapon is good for stabbing from hiding, and with an especially long head, can be grasped closer for fighting up close. This ability is used to attack with this weapon, or other polearms.

Outdoor Abilities

Camouflage (Instinct)

This ability is used to stay hidden in plain sight by using natural patterns, covering one's self with mud or leaves, and otherwise blending in with a wooded environment.

Priestly Abilities

Tree-bond (Instinct)

This ability allows the user to travel in and navigate the Green World. A successful roll is necessary to enter the Green World. With another successful roll, one can navigate anywhere in Khale, or anywhere in the Green World one has already been. A third successful roll is necessary to travel to any time besides the present.

Genealogy (Reason)

Knowledge of one's lineage is of great importance for a Khalean bard. Being able to find a common ancestor with a stranger automatically grants you kinship with him, and can turn an enemy into a stranger. This ability is used for recalling this sort of knowledge, and giving proper greetings to strangers, especially chiefs of other tribes.

Khale Cultural Secrets

Secret of the Perfect Chord, Joy

With a successful Music Ability Check, which can be resisted with a Resist Ability Check, your character can evoke swellings of joy in all listeners. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Secret of the Perfect Chord, Sorrow

With a successful Music Ability Check, which can be resisted with a Resist Ability Check, your character can evoke tears of sorrow in all listeners. Cost: 1 Instinct.

Secret of the Perfect Chord, Sleep

With a successful Music Ability Check, which can be resisted with a Resist Ability Check, your character can put all listeners to sleep. Cost: 2 Reason.

Secret of the Forest's Embrace

Your character gains a bonus die to Stealth and Battle when in thick forest. Cost: nothing.

Secret of Forest Transport

Your character may bring others with him when he travels into the Green World, holding the portal open for them. The ancestors, should they live, will hold you responsible for your visitors' actions. Cost: 1 Vigor per person.

Secret of Bough's Bosom

While in the Green World, your character automatically receive a bonus die for any Healing Checks. Cost: none.

Secret of the Moon Heart

Your character has absorbed a quantity of moon-metal, which has bonded with his flesh. You no longer need fire to mold the metal into new forms, and can spend Vigor on a one-for-one basis for bonus dice when forcing the metal to keep its form. You cannot ever enter the Green World, however, and all attacks against you with wooden weapons do +1 damage. Cost: none.

Khale Cultural Keys

Key of the Tribe

Your character's tribe is a great part of his identity. Gain 1 XP whenever your character does something to help the tribe. Gain 2 XP whenever your character defends or helps the tribe even though it brings him ridicule or inconvenience. Gain 5 XP whenever your character defends the tribe in battle. Buyoff: Leave the tribe.

Key of the Lost Child

Your character has no tribe. They are lost to the Green World, or perhaps decimated in battle. It is his duty to carry on the tribe's name. Gain 1 XP every time your character tells a story of his tribe. Gain 2 XP whenever your character defends his tribe's name or lands in words or in battle. Gain 5 XP whenever your character finds a new legend of his tribe. Buyoff: Join another tribe.

Sample Khalean Names

Males: Pwyll, Nevins, Bowdyn, Gwawl, Aonghus, Morvyn, Dwayne, Kelvin, Keaghan, Brasil, Cathair, Hueil, Donat, Eoghann, Newlyn

Females: Maeveen, Isolde, Elsha, Aphria, Evelina, Moyna, Deirdre, Jennifer, Wynne, Yseult, Africa, Violet, Donella, Grania, Merna

Sample Khalean Character Ideas

- a shamed warrior, cast out from his tribe
- a bard full of tales and looking for more
- a lost Ratkin adopted into a tribe
- a tribe-less pirate of the high seas

Maldor, the Seat of Destruction

Introduction

“This package - bomb, you call it - will unseat the tyrant?” the farmer asked, his hands dirtying the paper as he carefully handled it.

The voice from the shadow chuckled. “It will knock him right out of his seat. If my calculations are correct, it will kill him as well. Just remember the phrase.”

“On Tax-Day, another great gift I have brought my - ”

“Don’t finish that sentence. It shouldn’t work, but let’s not take any chances. It will go off as soon as you say that in the presence of our great liege.” An odd squeak came from the darkened corner at the word.

“And I?”

“You will die.”

The farmer sighed, wet and heavy in his lungs. “And my family?”

“They will disappear from the land. They will be taken care of well. They are part of our... tribe now.”

Filthy hands pushed the package into a knapsack, and the freedom fighter turned away, resigned.

The shadow grew larger and fell across the farmer. “Man, you do good work for the people.”

His face away from the shadow, the man of the dirt nodded slowly. “Freedom is the people’s work,” he replied as a white furred hand, fingers ending in claws, squeezed his shoulder.

An Empire Fallen

Across the deep waters of Absolon’s Way lie the ruins of Maldor, once the grandest empire Near has ever known. Before the Shadow Moon came, Maldor ruled the world, its empire spreading from the Eastern Sea to the frozen waters of the South and the Hungry River of the north. Maldor’s most distinctive feature was its tremendous walled cities, giant sealed engines of industry and culture. As the empire fell and shrunk back to the center of Near, many of its cities were ruined as terror and plague eradicated their denizens. These cities, filled with secrets and danger, are a destination for especially foolish or brave adventurers.

Maldor is made up of a variety of geography, from rolling plains stretching to the ocean in the east to forest-covered hills in the west. It once was beautiful. It now looks like someone dropped a bomb on the cover of a sad-eyed-wizard fantasy novel.

A Land of Lieges

When the Sky Fire fell, Emperor Absolon passed on, and Maldor passed into darkness. As people took to the land again, the country found itself shattered, with local lords claiming royal blood dividing the land up like lions with a carcass: unfair and bloody. The disparity between the wealthy and poor is immense; only those families with great stone fortresses and great stores were able to emerge as anything but destitute. The lords of the land press commoners into service as infantry, farmers, smiths, or whatever suits their whims. Out-right war between these lords is not uncommon as they attempt to gain dominance over each other. None have achieved their goal, however, and the country remains divided.

The Maldorites are shell-shocked, blindly attempting to follow their old ways of life in a ruined empire. The people are a mix of ethnicities, although the noble lines are all Caucasian in appearance. While family is important - the nobility treasures their blood, and the peasants huddle together - they are often separated by war, hunger, and wonderlust. Filthy children run rampant; with nothing to own, people make much of their only resource.

The Remnants of Culture

Maldor is in its dark ages; art and culture take second-place to survival. Among the noble classes, art still exists in collections from before the Shadow Moon came. Tapestries, painting, and sculpture are most prized. Artists are employed by lords, but innovation is rare: the artists are called on to make knock-offs of pre-Shadow art more than anything else. Musicians and actors do well if they can find a liege, as owning the better court entertainment is a major point of pride for these cardboard nobles playing at being kings.

Other troubadours wonder the countryside, going from inn to inn to make a few pieces of gold. It is said that one enterprising merchant hired a gang of mercenaries to pillage a fallen city and is now printing books using a press they managed to liberate. From the borderlands, there are stories of commoners banding together to rebuild villages; these communes are said to sponsor community theatres of dubious quality, but high humor.

The food of Maldor is considered bland by the rest of the world, but is hearty and filling. Potatoes are served at every meal, from a commoner's feast to a noble's snack. On the other hand, Maldor's beer is the best in the world.

Let Them Eat War

The Maldor economy can be described as an ever-hungry violent monster, constantly devouring itself to live. Farmers grow grain, corn, potatoes, and other root vegetables and raise goats, sheep, and cattle for milk and food, but it never seems to be enough, especially as the lords take an obscene amount of crops and livestock in land taxes to pay for their wars. Beer and distilled potato liquor make up a large amount of their exports, especially to Goren. Metal is found in the western hills, and what doesn't become an axe or breastplate gets sold to the iron-poor north. Most families have to supplement their income by taking up the sword. The nobles promise good pay in their armies, although plenty of idiot young people end up dying on the end of a sword before payday.

Individual lords in Maldor supplement their coffers by trading priceless artifacts and antiquities to foreigners. The Ammenite Houses are the major buyers of these objects. There is good pay in Maldor for a seasoned explorer; the ruins of many great cities are filled with arms and art, as well as fierce Ratkin unlikely to appreciate pillagers.

Messiahs and Magicians

The lords of Maldor are monotheistic. Their religion centers around a variation of ancient pagan sun god worship: they have melded the figure of the sun god and Absolon, saying that the Year of Shadow was Absolon's sacrifice as he descended into the underworld, then rose against, undefeated by Shadow. Their priests prophesy his return to Near as a king that will re-unite Maldor and make it strong again. Some philosophers might debate about when Absolon will come again, but the lords do not: there's not a one of them without the hubris to think that he is Absolon-Come-Again, and that all will bow down to him. This messiah complex makes their wars all the more bloody, of course.

This monotheism trickles down to the peasants, who tend to worship the sun god in its more pagan aspect, as a giver of life and blessing. Unlike the lords, the peasants definitely argue about when Absolon will return:

their dream of a better day is well-deserved, but pathetic. As Maldor was once a great multi-cultural cornucopia, though, religion varies widely among its lower classes, who practice animism, ancestor worship, or any variety of other religious practices in addition to sun-worship.

Rumors of a Shadow Cult abound, evildoers who would try to throw down the sun and replace it with their dark Queen of Shadow. Who the Shadow Cult is unknown. Earls and dukes tell their people that the Shadow Cult are the followers of other earls and dukes; advisors tell their lords that the Shadow Cult grows among their own people; commoners believe the Shadow Cult are the Ratkin, or nasty elves, or their next-door neighbors, depending on what day of the week it is. Some elements have been assassinating self-proclaimed messiahs and blowing up castle walls without getting caught, but leave no clue as to who they are.

The Three-Corner Academy

When Maldor reigned supreme, Emperor Absolon sponsored a great academy of magic, built as a giant triangle-shaped fortress hidden in the western hills, drawing his advisors from the best of their ranks. Strangely, no one knows exactly where the academy is today: many adventurers claim to have seen it, but all directions given to it end up nowhere. Most reports of it say that strange white Ratkin swarm its halls.

In its zenith, the Three-Corner Academy pressed its own philosophy of magic, based off two inter-locking triangles, the Day Triangle and Night Triangle. It trained students from all over Near within its walls, and the remnants of its learning can still be found in pockets spread over the world.

In this time, Three-Corner magic is more common in Maldor than anywhere else in Near, but any sort of magic is more feared. Many nobles have court magicians that act as diviners and advisors. The combination of these powerful rulers and rumors of the Shadow Cult put fear in the hearts of superstitious commoners, who often flee from a magician's path, or in large numbers, burn the witch.

Other Species in Maldor

Maldor is a rather xenophobic land; other species do not generally find it a welcoming place. Elves are distrusted, as they disappeared during the Year of Shadow. Still, they are sometimes found in the royal courts, which does not add to their reputation among the common folk at all.

Ratkin are the least liked and most numerous. Ratkin infest the old ruined cities of Maldor, and are often the only residents there. Most lords in Maldor offer rewards for Ratkin heads, and serfs desperate for money will band together into hunting parties for the sentient rodents.

Goblins get the most mixed reaction. Most are harmless, and can be found all over, from court jesters to household pets to wizards' apprentices to great warrens of them holed up in hill caves. Some of the most vile goblin experiments come from Night magicians of the Three-Corner School, however, and mothers scare their children from a young age with tales of the Hungry Ones and the Violators.

Philosophy of Three-Corner Magic

Like many mystic philosophies, Three-Corner Magic revolves around the connection between body, mind, and spirit, or Vigor, Instinct, and Reason, in this case. For each of these, there is one Day focus and one Night focus, with the Day focus being considered more benign. Students were generally not taught the Night focus until their masters thought they had become adept with the Day focus. Now, with the school scattered and third-generation knowledge being passed down, training has lost a lot of structure. The Night foci are more widely taught; they also are believed to be evil by many, instead of being capable of being used for evil, a distinction held in the old days.

Creation and Destruction are the simplest foci, being merely making physical constructs or tearing them down. Enhancement is making something even more itself than it already is; Transformation focuses on making it different, changing its identity. Divination is seeing the truth; Enthrallment clouds the minds of others and hides the truth.

Three-Corner Foci		
	Day	Night
Vigor	Creation	Destruction
Instinct	Enhancement	Transformation
Reason	Divination	Enthrallment

The Laws of Three-Corner Magic

There are a few laws that are always in place, unless a Secret alters them, when using Three-Corner magic.

- The target of a magical effect must either be the caster, or something or someone the caster is touching.
- Only one target can be affected with a magical effect.
- A magical effect, except Destruction, is either instantaneous or lasts one hour. (Destruction is instantaneous, but the damage remains.)
- Every magical effect done to a target can be resisted, if the target desires. Usually, a Resist Ability Check is done by the target opposing the player's Ability Check with his character's magical ability.

Three-Corner Magic Abilities

Artistic Abilities

Transformation (Instinct)

The character can transfer the target's attribute points from one attribute to another equal to his Success Level.

Craft Abilities

Creation (Vigor)

The character can create a small amount of one of the basic elements (fire, air, earth, water) from nothing.

Fighting Abilities

Destruction (Vigor)

The character can hurt a target with damage equal to his Success Level. The description of this damage is done by the player, and could be anything from telekinetic tearing of the target's body to a ghostly, arcane flame, but is definitely unnatural.

Illicit Abilities

Enthrallment (Reason)

The character can force his will on a target, who is well aware what is happening.

Priestly Abilities

Divination (Reason)

The character can sense magic auras on an object or person he touches.

Creation and Destruction

I've been asked, why couldn't a character create a big chunk of rock over an enemy's head to kill him, instead of using Destruction? The answer is, of course he can. There are limits, though. First, the opponent gets to make a Reaction Ability Check (if he's aware of the magic), which he may be better at than Resist. Second, damage is figured out by using the caster's Success Level with the magic, multiplied by the number of Force spent if using Create Mass. Without Create Mass, the amount of mass created usually isn't enough to hurt anyone.

Social Abilities

Enhancement (Instinct)

The character can give bonus dice to any other character's Ability Check. You must make a resisted ability against the other character's ability. If you are successful, your Success Levels are used as bonus dice on the check; if not, they receive a penalty die.

Three-Corner Magic Secrets

Secret of the Invisible Hand

Normally, your character must touch a target to affect it with magic. With this Secret, he can affect any target he can see or have the effects of his magic occur anywhere he can see. Cost: 1 point from the associated attribute.

Secret of the Invisible Arm

Your character can physically manipulate objects through telekinesis. This power is not as strong or coordinated as his normal body: all actions take a penalty die, although pools can be spent as normal to alleviate this. Cost: 1 Vigor. Prerequisite: Secret of the Invisible Hand.

Secret of Magical Contagion

Normally, your character's magic affects one target. You can spread his magic over a group of targets by spending points from the associated attribute.

Cost:

- A small group of targets (around 5) can be affected for 1 point.
- A large group of targets (25 or less) can be affected for 3 points.
- A crowd of targets (100 or less) can be affected for 6 points.
- A horde of targets (all that the caster can see) can be affected for 10 points.

Secret of Magical Persistence

Normally, your character's magic can last for a maximum of one hour. With this Secret, you can extend the duration by spending from the associated attribute.

Cost:

- For 1 point, you can extend until sundown (or sunrise if used at night).
- For 3 points, you can extend until the end of one moon phase (end of the week).
- For 6 points, you can extend until the next eclipse (end of the month).
- For 10 points, you can extend until one complete sun cycle (either solstice).

Secret of Magical Effect

You can increase the Success Level of a successful Three-Corner Magic Ability Check by 1. Cost: 1 associated attribute point.

Secret of Sympathetic Magic

If your character has an item of the target he is attempting to affect with magic, you gain a bonus die on your Ability Check. Cost: None.

Transformation Secrets

Craft

Your character can use any of his Craft or Artistic skills magically, making their action instantaneous. The Craft or Artistic skill is rolled first, with Success Levels acting as bonus dice on the Transformation Skill Check. Cost: 1 Instinct.

Living Morph

You can change the target's form into that of another living creature, moving around their Attribute points as you want at the same time. This costs a minimum of one Instinct. You can spend extra Instinct points to:

- Double or half the target's size. If this is not done, the target becomes a creature of its same size.
- Flip two skill scores. One of the skills does not have to be stated, if you flip for the target's best skill.
- Add a weapon to the target. One Instinct must be spent per weapon bonus.
- Add a Secret to the target.

Cost: 1+ Instinct.

Creation Secrets

Create Anything

Your character can create any pure material that he wants. Pure material is not as simple as any one of the real-world elements: alloys and such count. What is prohibited is creating, for example, wood and metal at the same time. Steel, an alloy, is fine. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Create Mass

Your character can create a mass of material. This is roughly equal to 50 lbs (23 kg), doubled for each extra Vigor spent, and can be in any non-complex shape, such as a sphere, wall, or cube. Cost: 1+ Vigor.

Destruction Secrets

Inner Damage

Your character can damage targets' attributes, removing points, instead of doing physical damage. Cost: 1 Vigor.

Massive Damage

The damage done with Destruction is equal to your SL's multiplied by the amount of Vigor spent. Cost: 2+ Vigor.

Enthrallment Secrets

Gentle Touch

Your character can use Enchantment without making his target aware that he is being manipulated. Cost: 1 Reason.

Alter Senses

You can alter a target's senses. Cost: 1 Reason per sense.

Divination Secrets

Know Truth

Your character can know the answer to any question asked of him. The GM will determine the clarity of these answers by your Success Levels. Cost: 1 Reason.

Know Capabilities

You can learn game statistics about a target, such as a particular attribute score, best skill and score, or specific skill and score. You can learn a number of bits of information equal to the number of Reason spent. Cost: 1+ Reason.

Enhancement Secrets

Empower Others

Your character can spend his pools to give other characters bonus dice or power their Secrets. This follows all normal rules; for example, only one point can be spent for bonus dice per action unless the receiving character has a Secret that allows more. Cost: none.

Burst of Power

By focusing on another character's action, you cause all dice rolled in their Ability Check to have the potential for bonus dice. Every odd result on a dice results in a bonus die given; this continues with these bonus dice, as well. If the Ability Check had penalty dice, the lowest die is discarded instead of giving a bonus die. Cost: 1 Instinct and one point of the ability associated with the other character's action.

Improvising New Three-Corner Magic Secrets

During the course of a game, a player or the Story Guide may want to expand what can be done with magic. As written, for example, Creation can only create inanimate objects. What if a wizard wants to temporarily create a living being, though? The GM and player may work together to expand the usage of magic with new Secrets. The GM needs to determine whether the usage is permissible in his campaign and how powerful it is. Using that, a new Three-Corner Secret can be co-written by the Story Guide and player to fit the new usage. An example of one that would allow for the creation of living beings:

Creation: Create Life

The caster can create a living being from thin air. This being has a number of Advances equal to the number of Vigor spent minus 2 plus the Success Levels of the Creation Ability Check. Cost: 2+ Vigor.

In order to create a new Three-Corner Magic Secret, the character needs to either spend much time in research, or hunt down a source of learning the new Secret.

Spells

Spells are defined usages of Three-Corner magic, crafted by players or Story Guides. When a character performs something with magic that he would like to do again in the future, he may write up exactly how the magic worked as a spell, and then take that spell as a Secret. The advantages to this are that the spell costs one less pool point than it would normally. In addition, a spell may be taken multiple times as a Secret in order to further reduce its cost.

Characters that do not have the Secrets that make up a spell can still take the spell, although they cannot make new spells that rely on Secrets they do not have. In this case, they must be taught the spell by someone else. This is a good option for a character that focuses on something besides magic, but wants to be able to use a few pre-defined magical effects.

Sample spells

Instant Sword (Creation + Transformation)

A sword made of solid steel appears in the caster's hand. The caster can make a Rough Crafts Skill Check, with the bonus dice adding to this spell's Skill Roll. This sword lasts for one hour.

Cost:

- Creation: Create Anything: 1 Vigor.
- Transformation: Craft: 1 Instinct.
- Total cost: 1 Vigor + 1 Instinct - 1 = 1 Vigor or 1 Instinct.

Wrack (Destruction)

The caster can decimate the pools of anyone in his sight. A number of pool points equal to twice times the caster's Success Levels are destroyed.

Cost:

- Secret of the Invisible Hand: 1 Vigor.
- Destruction: Inner Damage: 1 Vigor.
- Destruction: Massive Damage: Twice the Success Levels = 2 Vigor.
- Total cost: 1 + 1 + 2 - 1 = 3 Vigor.

Be Unseen (Enthrallment)

The target of this spell becomes not present in the eyes of those that surround him. (Dogs and other animals that track with their noses are unaffected, if a bit confused.) While this spell is negated immediately if more than 25 people are looking for the target, that shouldn't happen too much. Anyone looking for the target specifically can roll a Resist Skill Check versus the Success Level of this spell. This effect lasts an hour.

Cost:

- Secret of Magical Contagion (large group): 2 Reason
- Gentle Touch: 1 Reason
- Alter Senses (sight): 1 Reason
- Total cost: 2 + 1 + 1 - 1 = 3 Reason.

Werewolf Transformation (Transformation)

The target becomes a bi-pedal wolven engine of destruction until the next eclipse. Reason is reduced to one point, with the points split between Vigor and Instinct. The target's best ability is flipped for Scrapping, and the target's second best ability is flipped for Bash and Hold. The target's fingers become claws with +1 damage to rip soft things like flesh, clothes, and leather. You must touch the target to cast this spell.

Cost:

- Secret of Magical Persistence: effect lasts until next eclipse = 6 Instinct.
- Transformation: Living Morph: 1 base Instinct + 2 for skill flips + 1 for the claws = 4 Instinct.
- Total cost: 6 + 4 - 1 = 9 Instinct.

Maldorite Cultural Abilities

Fighting Abilities

Infantry (Vigor)

This is the use of larger swords and axes and metal armor, as well as working as part of a fielded army.

Illicit Abilities

Demolition (Reason)

The revolutionary elements in Maldor have re-discovered the ancient knowledge of explosives, although they haven't made the discovery of firearms yet. This ability allows one to create and detonate these implements of destruction, hopefully without losing a hand.

Outdoor Abilities

Direction Sense (Instinct)

Many an explorer in Maldor has found himself lost inside a great walled city, mazes of tunnels intersecting. This ability is used to determine which way you're coming from and which way you're heading.

Scrounging (Instinct)

While most Maldorites are very poor, their land is covered with the riches of times past. This ability can be used to find items or materials when they should not be commonly found.

Maldorite Cultural Secrets

There are no unique Secrets to Maldor outside of Three-Corner Magic.

Maldorite Cultural Keys

Key of the Revolutionary

Your character is dedicated to overthrowing a ruling class, party, or government. Gain 1 XP every time he speaks out against the rulers, or breaks a minor law. Gain 2 XP every time he acts directly against the rulers. Gain 5 XP every time he puts himself in great danger in order to damage the status quo. Buyoff: Accept any favor from the rulers in order for your quietude or complicity.

Key of the Manipulator

Your character works behind the scenes, manipulating others in order to be a shadow ruler. Your character must work for or be an advisor of someone in a position of power. Gain 1 XP whenever your character exerts his will over his ruler, even over minor matters - especially over minor matters. Gain 2 XP whenever the ruler accepts your character's advice over others. Gain 5 XP whenever your character's influence makes the ruler make a policy change or establish a new policy that works in your character's favor. Buyoff: Accept the mantle of power for one's self.

Sample Maldorite Character Ideas

- a peasant infantryman
- a Ratkin explorer of ruined cities
- a reclusive elven magician
- a knight seeking to unite the Maldor people
- a consort of lords, gaining knowledge for her own purposes

Qek, the Land of Mystery

Introduction

Mutex and his father each took a swig from the jug of watered-down araka. It had been a good day fishing, and it had been a good thirteenth birthday. A new set of bone fishing-arrows was an excellent gift, and it fit Mutex's new role perfectly. He was now an adult, and he would provide the family's sea-meat.

A kayak rose over the waves. "Laertes!" Mutex called out. The Ammenite trader had been good to his family, trading good rice and bamboo for shiny rocks and knowledge. Mutex's brother had taught him the secrets of the kayak.

Mutex's nose filled with a black scent, though, carried over the Sea of Teeth. He stood to see, and saw his friend was in dire trouble or mad. A dozen kayaks came behind him, each ridden by a foul shade-thing, a dead spirit trapped in a dead body, rotting flesh and hungry teeth.

The ocean's roar filled the air, yet Mutex's voice could be heard above it. "Drown!" he roared, and nine kayaks dived into the rough waters. It was not enough to save his father, though, he knew, just as he knew what to do next. Drawing out a jeweled knife, he cut his palm, and then made a slashing motion in the air with the hand, his blood spraying into a door, a door into death which his spirit stepped into.

His roho flew over the waters with only moments to spare, a bright form, sharp with anger, and cut each dead thing's spark from its putrid body. Exhausted, he fell to rest in his own body again.

His father's face was proud and stern, a weapon severing him as well as his dagger. "You will never return to your mother again. Go now."

A Jungle at the Top of the World

Qek is the northernmost known land in Near, and one of the most forbidding. Filled from coast to mountain with thick rainforest and jungle, Qek is a place of mystery and legend. It is the borderlands of the world and the north coast of the Sea of Teeth.

This hot jungle-land might well be left alone, were it not for the copious amounts of jewels found in its caves. There are no cities, no centers of civilization, only the smallest of villages along the coastline.

The people of Qek live among the jungle in small family units. Short, thin, and brown, the Qek (as they call both themselves and their land) hunt wild birds, boars, and reptiles and gather wild fruits for their sustenance. The people of inner Qek are generally unknown to outsiders; the families along Qek's shores that live on fishing are the few that generally speak with non-Qek. The boats of these people are legendary - small one-man kayaks made of jungle wood that they use to surf on top of the waves of the Border Sea, easily outrunning any other ship.

The Family is a Breathing Thing

The only real unit of people in Qek is the family. Families live together, carving out a small bit of land to call their own, although there's no real land ownership. Three generations usually live together: a husband and wife, some of their parents, and their children. Generally, as sons and daughters grow to maturity, they leave and form new family units; as one half of a couple dies of old age, the other will live with one of their children.

Qek has no government, but each family unit is part of a larger family unit. Within the larger family unit,

families defer to the family they grew up in when they meet. In distant relations, the older family is deferred to, although they often choose another to make decisions. There is no clan-type structure in Qek: there are no clumps of unrelated people at all.

Stories without Letters

The Qek have no written language, at least not since the Year of Shadow. Because of this, their art revolves around painting and oral storytelling. A great majority of their art is utilitarian in nature: ornately carved spears and staffs; beautifully crafted clay jugs; shields painted with intricate camouflaging patterns. Without cities, traditional sculpture is almost unknown, although carved frescos in rock are relatively common, used to tell ancient stories.

The music of Qek is unearthly, and most outsiders have a hard time appreciating it. Their language is made up of a multitude of hard consonants, which lends a guttural quality to it, whether spoken or sung. In addition, the music has no traditional rhythm, instead alternating between discordant rhythms frequently. While a large part of their music - all based around stories - is sung, it is sometimes accompanied by a *churang*, a guitar-like instrument made of dried innards strung across a hollowed-out armadillo shell.

Araka effects

Distilled

- One penalty die to all Reason-based abilities.
- Two points of damage.
- If the Stay Up check is successful, heightened sense of spirits: two bonus dice to all Pray, Create, Sway, or Dueling Ability checks made against spirits.

Qek's jungles are full of succulent fruit and spices, and are used liberally to season their food. A speciality that has reached out to be eaten elsewhere in Near is wild boar glazed with mango and coca, a plant native only to Qek. Coca (in the modern day, chocolate) grows in huge pods within Qek's jungles, and is used to make a hallucinatory beverage called *araka* of dried coca pods, fermented bananas, and hot chiles.

All That Glitters is Trouble

The Qek do trade with the people of Khale (and to a lesser degree, the people of Oran), exchanging wild fruits and coca for tools of metal, which they do not have the craft to make themselves. In addition, Qek is known for its precious gems. The people of Qek find these stones useless except for tools (they tip their own spears with diamond, which slip through armor as if it were butter, for example) and they are often traded for goods or services. Men from other countries that do not respect the sanctity of Qek often attempt to sneak into the country and smuggle out gems and coca pods, although few return.

Everything that Breathes Dies

The people of Qek do not speak of religion: they worship no single entity or have organized worship. They do, however, have a strong belief in the idea of spirits.

Spirits have three forms, the *roho*, the *sasha*, and the *zamani*. (In case you're curious, the plural form of these words are the same as the singular.) The *roho* are the spirits of the living, the animus that gives them individuality and vitality. These are bound within the bodies of people, animals, and plants. People and animals have the strongest *roho*, while plants have the oldest *roho*.

The *sasha* are the "half-dead." Those who have died that are personally remembered by those still alive are *sasha*. Memories from stories do not count: someone who met the person while alive must still live. These spirits have a will of their own and remember their name, and they are said to hover close to earth, watching those who knew them. Their will can be bent by changing the memories of their human tethers.

The zamani are the true dead, those long dead and forgotten. They do not remember their name and their own will is the longing for final rest, in the oblivion above the earth.

Spirit-talkers

Some Qek, through birth or training, find themselves walking the path of the walozi, or sorcerer. These people can speak to the dead, get rid of evil spirits, and even bind sasha and zamani to new bodies. The Qek are no strangers to magic, and do not fear it, but walozi cannot be part of any family once they contact their first spirit. They are ejected to live on their own.

Playing Your Character's Roho

If your character's adventuring in Qek, you might find yourself in the odd position of playing your own character's spirit. Have fun with this, and do not hold back, afraid that the roho will betray your character. How often do you get to play your character's internal monologue?

Conversing with roho and sasha is considered fine magic to use, and families will often consult walozi to contact their loved dead. Consorting with zamani, however, is dark magic, indeed, and any walozi known to do so is shunned. These necromancers will live deep within the jungle, performing their dark rites.

Roho can be:

- **Contacted.** The spirit of a living thing can be spoken with. The spirit knows nothing that the person or animal would not normally know, but if a person is in conflict, their spirit might just be spiteful, and give information they would not. Contacting the roho of a person or animal without their consent is difficult, and cannot be done without trapping them.
- **Severed.** To sever one's roho is to render their body will-less and barely alive. As long as the roho lives, the body will as well, but will only act on command from the walozi who severed the spirit. This is definitely considered a black art.

Sasha can be:

- **Contacted.** A walozi can easily speak with the half-dead. Their answers are up to them.
- **Given form.** A walozi can let a sasha take spectral form and move freely. They can perform no physical act upon the tangible world, and cannot be harmed by physical means.
- **Bound.** Sasha can be bound into their original bodies. The body must either be in good health, or ritually prepared. This same ritual is used to restore a severed roho to its body.
- **Severed.** With this ritual, one can get rid of a spectral or bound sasha.

Zamani can be:

- **Given form.** An evil walozi can give the zamani spectral form. They have few real features, appearing as withered, hungry ghosts.
- **Bound.** Zamani can be bound into dead bodies, either fresh dead or ritually prepared. Unlike sasha, these do not have to be their original bodies, and can even be animal bodies.
- **Controlled.** Zamani are bitter, hateful things with no want except to kill their summoner and return to death. A walozi can impose his will upon them with this ritual.
- **Severed.** The beloved ritual of the zamani, this returns them to their sleep.

Other Species in Qek

The Qek have little problem with other species in their land, being a pretty curious people themselves. Elves are known to travel through Qek on occasion; some stories say they come from the wild deserts over the northern mountains as escaped slaves. What exactly enslaves elves is unknown, which is probably for the best. Goblins infest the hills at Qek's northern borders and run free through its jungles. Ratkin are rare in Qek, and thought of as a myth.

Sasha and Zamani

When sasha or zamani come into the living world, either as a spirit or bound to a body, there are limits to their abilities.

Sasha start as they were in life, but have half of their normal pools, and their ability scores are capped at twice the Success Level of the Ability Check used to summon them. The number of combined Secrets and Keys they can have are capped at the Success Level. Success Level 6 grants full restoration, including pools and Secrets. If bound to a dead body, they are automatically severed when broken.

Zamani can have no Keys. They start with abilities like beasts with two in each ability, and have no pools. They have advances equal to twice the Success Level of the Ability Check used to summon them. Half of these advances are spent by the player, if a player's character has summoned a zamani; the other half are spent by the Story Guide. If bound to a dead body, they are automatically severed when bloodied.

Playing a Sasha

Players with dead characters should feel free to have their characters brought back through Qek sorcery. They do obey all normal rules on pool and ability caps, but can gain experience for as long as they remain in the living world. If severed, they must be re-summoned and hope again for a skilled sorcerer.

Qek Cultural Abilities

Craft Abilities

Gem-Cutting (Reason)

This is the art of cutting gems to pleasing shapes without causing flaws.

Fighting Abilities

Panther Style (Instinct)

Qek fighters melt in and out of the forest, stabbing their prey with a spear before they can ever be seen.

Outdoor Abilities

Kayaking (Instinct)

This ability is used to sail the one-man kayaks popular along the shore of Qek without smashing one's head into vicious rocks or drowning in the sudden waves of the Sea of Teeth.

Qek Cultural Secrets

Secret of the Walozi

Either through an unusual birth or training, your character has the power of the walozi. He knows the rituals for contacting spirits, and can attempt this by spending one Vigor and using the Pray ability. This ritual takes about fifteen minutes to perform.

Ritual of Spectral Form

This ritual gives form to a sasha or zamani spirit upon a successful Create Ability Check. This ritual takes about half an hour to perform. Cost: 1 Vigor and 1 Instinct. Prerequisite: Secret of the Walozi.

Ritual of Binding

The walozi with this ritual can bind a spectral sasha or zamani spirit to a body. This requires no Ability Check, and costs one Vigor. However, an unwilling spirit can make a Resist Ability Check. If successful, the walozi must spend a number of Vigor points equal to the spirit's Success Level. This ritual takes at least an hour to perform. Cost: 1+ Vigor. Prerequisite: Secret of the Walozi.

Ritual of Severance

Using this ritual, a walozi can sever a spirit with a successful Dueling Ability Check. This has no cost, but the walozi has a penalty die unless his roho is separated from his body. Speaking of that, a walozi can use this ritual to separate his roho from his body, severing himself. He can rejoin with his body simply by having his roho touch it and willing it so, but rival walozi might take advantage of this situation. Note that sasha and zamani might well have this ritual and fight back if one is spectral. This ritual takes one minute to perform if bound to one's body; if spectral, it's instantaneous as the two spirits fight. Prerequisite: Secret of the Walozi, or be a sasha or zamani.

Ritual of Zamani Control

This ritual allows the walozi to convince a zamani given form to do something besides destroy blindly, given a successful Sway Ability Check. Their need for destruction is so great that normal social interaction will not work. This ritual requires nothing more than special intonation and a hand signal. Prerequisite: Secret of the Walozi.

Ritual of Vessel Preparation

By removing all organs and applying powders, stuffing, and wax, one can prepare a dead body to accept a spirit with a successful Fine Crafts Ability Check. This not only allows a long-dead sasha to inhabit their old body, but has the added advantage of making the body much less vulnerable to physical harm. The body cannot be bloodied, and no penalty die is taken when the first Stay Up roll is failed. Instead, after a second Stay Up roll is failed, the spirit is automatically severed. What can make a ritually prepared vessel even more powerful is combining this ritual with the Secret of Imbuement.

Qek Cultural Keys

Key of the Death-Hunter

Your character fulfills a strange role in Qek society: he consorts with the zamani in order to make sure they can find their final rest. He dabbles in forbidden knowledge solely to put that knowledge to sleep. Gain 1 XP whenever your character is in a scene with zamani. Gain 2 XP whenever he sends zamani off to the Final Death. Gain 5 XP whenever he defeats a walozi that summons up zamani. Buyoff: Summon up a zamani.

Key of the Astral Traveler

Your character is dedicated to a world outside his body, taking hallucingens in order to change his perception. Gain 1 XP every time your character takes a drug purported to change his reality. Gain 3 XP every time your character separates his spirit from his body. Buyoff: Shirk away from an opportunity to see a situation from an altered perspective.

Sample Qek Character Ideas

- a jungle monster-hunter
- an elven explorer
- a fierce fisherman of the untamed Border Sea
- a reclusive walozi on a quest for knowledge
- a warrior whose family has been killed by jewel thieves
- a wild monkey-like goblin

Sample Names

Male: Ahexotl, Camaxtli, Coccoza, Ecatzin, Guacra, Hobnil, Huemac, Itzcoatl, Maxtla, Mutex, Ocelopan, Rimac, Pusca, Tangaxoan, Tlaloc, Yaotl, Zoltan

Female: Atzi, Centehua, Chantica, Cusi, Itzel, Ixchell, Malinche, Metztli, Nhutalu, Ocllo, Quispe, Runti, Tlaco, Xoco, Ysalane, Zafrina